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EDITOR'S NOTE

The latest issue of Strategic Impact, volume number 93, features a diverse collection of articles that address emerging challenges, and explore the frontiers of political-military topicality and information society. This volume also showcases two book reviews written by our esteemed colleagues researchers, and it presents the insights of the third Workshop on the impact of climate-change on national security, held on December, 2024, which closes the series of scientific events regarding this topic.

The first section, *Political-Military Topicality*, opens the volume with an article written by Mr. Cristian Panait, PhD, in which he examines how volunteer military units develop and maintain group cohesion, using Ukraine conflict as a case study. The study identifies three key mechanisms that enable cohesive action in such units, respectively swift trust that allows fighters to form immediate functional relationships based on role expectations and urgent shared goals; leadership-driven cohesion, which emerges when strong leaders act as stabilizing figures, compensating for the lack of established peer bonds, and stress-induced bonding that fosters solidarity as shared combat hardships create deep interpersonal connections despite diverse backgrounds.

The second article, signed by Mr. Andrei-Vasile Rus, examines the legal and operational framework of PMCs, focusing on Russia, and compares their role in foreign policy to similar entities from the United States and China. Mali's natural resources and strategic location make it a significant player in global power struggles, while its reliance on PMCs raises concerns about sovereignty, security, and foreign exploitation. By analyzing these dynamics, the article highlights the broader implications of PMC involvement in fragile states and their role as instruments of geopolitical influence.

The second rubric, *Geopolitics and Geostrategy: Trends and Perspectives*, features an article signed by Mr. Paul-Alexandru Sanda, PhD, which examines Russia's military strategic objectives during three years of operation in Ukraine. While many analysts view Russia as an irrational imperial power, the author argues that its military actions are driven by achievable strategic goals rather than irrational expansionism. Comparing these perspectives, the study suggests that a rational Russia is more dangerous than an irrational one. While irrational actions pose risks, they often backfire on the actor itself due to unforeseen costs. In contrast, a rational approach maximizes strategic gains for Russia while imposing severe, unintended burdens on other actors.



The Information Society rubric presents an article co-authored by Mrs. Diana-Cristiana Lupu and Mrs. Daniela Lică, which provides a narrative review of Large Language Models, particularly their potential use in generating propaganda within influence activities. The study examines security risks stemming from both inherent model vulnerabilities and malicious actors. The study also explores solutions to these risks, emphasizing EU strategies, policies, and regulations, with a focus on the AI act. It concludes that while LLMs should be integrated into daily life, they must remain tools that augment, rather than replace, human intelligence. The authors highlight the need for education, cultural awareness, audits, and accountability to ensure responsible AI usage. Additionally, trust in LLMs and the potential risks of relying on them for decision-making should be carefully evaluated.

In this edition, the **Book Review** rubric introduces two book reviews. The first, written by Mr. Vladimir-Mihai Zodian, PhD, talks about how a long-standing Romanian tradition holds that the nation's fate depends on its relationship with global powers. However, modern International Relations studies suggest that smaller powers play a more significant role than previously believed. Adrian-Eugen Preda's work bridges these views, arguing that this relationship is flexible and involves mutual influence between hegemonic and smaller states.

The second book review, written by the Director of the CDSSS, Colonel Florian Cîrciumaru, PhD, presents the book *Operational Design. Applying Operational Art into the Planning Process of Operations*, written by Brigadier General Craișor-Constantin Ioniță, PhD, Researcher, and Colonel Daniel Roman, PhD, Associated Professor who explore the role of operational art in military planning. The book highlights how key elements of operational design support decision-making and facilitate planning by defining problems clearly to find effective solutions.

Also, this edition includes the **Guide for authors**, a mandatory reading for those who wish to disseminate the research results in our journal.

For those discovering *Strategic Impact* for the first time, the publication is an open-access peer reviewed journal, edited by the Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies and published with the support of "Carol I" National Defence University Publishing House, and, also, a prestigious scientific journal in the field of military sciences, information and public order, according to the National Council for the Accreditation of University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates (CNATDCU).

Strategic Impact is an academic publication in the field of strategic defence and security studies. The journal has been published since 2000 in Romanian, and since 2005 in English, print and online. The journal is currently published exclusively in English. The articles are checked for plagiarism and scientifically evaluated (double blind peer review method). The thematic areas include political science, international relations, geopolitics, the political-military sphere, international organizations – with a focus on NATO and the EU information society, cyber security, intelligence



EDITOR'S NOTE

studies, military history, and emerging technologies. Readers will find in the pages of the publication strategic-level analyses, syntheses and evaluations, views that explore the impact of national, regional and global dynamics.

In terms of international visibility the primary objective of the publication the recognition of the scientific quality of the journal is confirmed by its indexing in the international databases CEEOL (Central and Eastern European Online Library, Germany), EBSCO (USA), Index Copernicus (Poland), ProQuest (USA), and WorldCat and ROAD ISSN, as well as its presence in the virtual catalogues of the libraries of prestigious institutions abroad, such as NATO and military universities in Bulgaria, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, etc.

The journal is distributed free of charge in main institutions in the field of security and defence, in the academia and abroad in Europe, Asia and America.

In the end, we encourage those interested in publishing in our journal to rigorously survey and assess the dynamics of the security environment and, at the same time, we invite students, master students and doctoral candidates to submit articles for publication in the monthly supplement of the journal, *Strategic Colloquium*, available at URL: <http://cssas.unap.ro/ro/cs.htm>, indexed in the international database CEEOL, Crossref, ROAD ISSN, and Google scholar, ResearchBib and Open Journal Systems.

Editor-in-Chief, Colonel Florian CÎRCIUMARU, PhD
Director of the Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies



GROUP COHESION IN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER MILITARY UNITS: INSIGHTS FROM THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

*Cristian PANAIT, PhD**

This paper investigates the emergence and maintenance of group cohesion in international volunteer military units, using the Ukraine conflict as a focal case. Conventional models of military cohesion emphasize prolonged training, shared routines, and extensive interpersonal bonding, processes generally unavailable to rapidly assembled volunteer forces. The study synthesizes the adaptive mechanisms enabling cohesive action in these unconventional units, through a documentation analysis of scholarly articles, field reports, and publicly available interviews with international volunteer fighters in Ukraine.

The findings highlight three primary pathways that compensate for the absence of traditional cohesion-building processes. Firstly, swift trust, based on role-based expectations and urgent shared objectives, allows strangers to form immediate functional relationships. Secondly, leadership-driven cohesion emerges when leaders act as psychological anchors, instilling unity and providing guidance in high-stress settings; strong leadership effectively substitutes for weaker peer bonds. Thirdly, stress-induced bonding underscores how shared combat hardships forge powerful interpersonal links, solidifying group solidarity despite members' diverse backgrounds and limited collective experience.

These insights expand conventional models of military group dynamics and have practical implications for training, organizational design, and psychological support in crisis-driven environments. By elucidating how international volunteer units in Ukraine cohere under minimal pre-deployment preparation, the paper challenges the assumption that lengthy, structured conditioning is the sole path to effective military teamwork. In doing so, it offers strategic lessons for future conflict scenarios involving spontaneously formed units, underscoring the potential for rapid yet resilient group cohesion through clearly defined roles, adaptive leadership, and collective stress experiences.

Keywords: *Volunteer Military Units; Group Cohesion, Swift Trust; Leadership; Stress-Induced Bonding; Ukraine Conflict; Rapid Mobilization; Combat Stress; Resilience in High-Stakes Environments.*

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Introduction

In military science, group cohesion is often described as the “glue” that binds members of a unit together, facilitating effective cooperation, resilience under stress, and combat readiness (Siebold & Kelly, 1988). This phenomenon of cohesion has been observed to play a pivotal role in the performance and psychological endurance of military units across diverse settings. Traditionally, cohesion in military units is fostered through extensive, shared training experiences, structured routines, and prolonged social interactions that establish trust and shared identity among unit members. Classic studies of military cohesion, largely based on research from state-led, professionalized Western armies, emphasize the necessity of these prolonged training periods and interpersonal bonding to develop mutual trust and loyalty. Just as soldiers train, live together, and fight alongside each other for extended periods of time, they form robust interpersonal bonds that enhance unit solidarity, providing psychological support and a strong sense of unity in the face of adversity. However, this traditional model faces challenges in application when considering the increasingly frequent reliance on volunteer or rapidly assembled combat units that lack the time or resources for traditional cohesion-building processes.

The Ukraine conflict provides a timely and urgent context to explore cohesion within these types of emergent military units. Unlike conventional military formations, Ukraine’s international volunteer battalions were assembled with limited lead time and composed of individuals from various civilian backgrounds, with little or no formal military training or prior association with one another. These volunteer units are often mobilized under immediate, high-stakes conditions, driven by a shared sense of national duty rather than pre-established military discipline. This phenomenon raises intriguing questions about how cohesion emerges in such spontaneously formed units, especially given that cohesion has been closely tied to shared, intensive training in traditional military contexts. Without the typical pathways for building trust, reliability, and shared understanding, how do volunteer soldiers come to work cohesively and effectively on the battlefield?

This article seeks to answer this question by conducting a documentation analysis of existing research on military cohesion, focusing on non-traditional forms of cohesion that may be applicable to volunteer forces such as those in Ukraine. Specifically, this study examines concepts of “swift trust”, the role of leadership as a substitute for peer bonding, and the psycho-social factors that allow soldiers to adapt to high-stress environments with minimal prior association. Documentation analysis provides a suitable methodology for this investigation, as it enables the synthesis of insights from multiple studies on cohesion in various military and paramilitary contexts. By examining existing research on cohesion in spontaneous or short-term military units, this study aims to provide a synthesized understanding of the mechanisms through which cohesion can emerge in rapidly assembled combat groups.



Swift trust, a relatively recent concept in the study of group cohesion, plays a central role in this analysis. Originally studied in temporary teams and ad-hoc organizations, *swift trust* refers to a form of immediate trust that does not rely on prolonged interaction or familiarity but instead on role expectations and shared goals. *Swift trust* is often seen in teams that are formed for a single purpose, where the urgency of the shared mission enables members to bypass traditional trust-building stages. In military settings, *swift trust* has been observed in temporary or coalition units where soldiers from different backgrounds or nationalities must quickly collaborate under extreme conditions. For Ukraine's volunteer forces, *swift trust* may serve as a crucial adaptation, allowing individuals with limited military experience and no prior relationships to function as a cohesive unit.

The role of leadership is another key factor in understanding cohesion within Ukraine's volunteer battalions. In conventional military units, peer bonds are strengthened over time through training and shared experiences. However, in ad-hoc or volunteer units, leadership often fills this gap, acting as a psychological and motivational anchor for soldiers who lack strong peer connections. Studies on cohesion in military psychology suggest that effective leaders can foster a sense of unity and stability by setting clear expectations, modeling resilience, and providing consistent support. This top-down approach to cohesion becomes especially important in volunteer units, where members may have varied backgrounds and training levels, and where the presence of a strong, dependable leader can create a unifying force in the face of combat stress.

Additionally, shared stress experiences are examined as a potential catalyst for cohesion within volunteer units. Combat situations inherently involve high levels of psychological and physical stress, which can foster a unique bond among soldiers. Research indicates that shared stress can act as a bonding agent, creating a mutual understanding and solidarity among soldiers as they navigate high-stakes environments together. For Ukraine's international volunteer units, this shared stress may provide an alternative pathway to cohesion, as individuals who undergo intense, life-threatening experiences together are often bonded by a sense of collective resilience. Unlike traditional military units, where cohesion develops gradually over time, volunteer units may form bonds quickly through shared exposure to combat stress, leading to a unique form of unity that is both resilient and adaptive.

Through a documentation analysis of relevant studies, this article explores how these non-traditional cohesion mechanisms *swift trust*, leadership driven cohesion, and stress-based bonding manifest in volunteer military units like those in Ukraine. By synthesizing insights from research on cohesion in diverse military contexts, the findings presented here aim to contribute to the broader understanding of how cohesion can emerge in spontaneous military formations. Ultimately, this study seeks to inform military psychology and organizational behavior by examining cohesion



in the unique context of volunteer forces, offering insights that may prove valuable for military planning, policy-making, and organizational strategies in future conflicts involving ad-hoc combat groups.

1. Literature review

1.1. Theoretical Background of Military Group Cohesion

Military group cohesion is a complex, multi-faceted construct that has been shown to significantly impact unit performance, morale, and resilience in combat settings. Foundational studies on military cohesion frequently define it in terms of two primary components: social cohesion, which pertains to interpersonal bonds and mutual trust among soldiers, and task cohesion, which reflects the shared commitment to accomplishing group objectives (MacCoun, 1993). According to Siebold and Kelly's (1988) model, effective military cohesion typically results from three distinct but interrelated forms of bonding: horizontal bonding (peer-to-peer), vertical bonding (leader-to-soldier), and organizational bonding (group's connection to the broader military institution). Traditional research posits that cohesion emerges gradually over time, as soldiers engage in prolonged, intensive training exercises that not only develop individual skills but also foster a shared identity and collective trust. This model, while robust in explaining cohesion within conventional, professionalized armies, faces limitations when applied to the emergent, rapidly assembled volunteer forces characteristic of certain modern conflicts, including the Ukraine war.

In the traditional cohesion model, time spent in shared training environments is seen as critical for establishing bonds between soldiers. In military boot camps and subsequent unit-based training, recruits often undergo rigorous physical and psychological challenges, designed not only to prepare them for combat but also to foster a sense of mutual reliance and solidarity. This process has been shown to yield strong social and task cohesion, as soldiers come to view each other as dependable teammates in whom they can place their *trust*. Such interpersonal bonds are further solidified in field exercises and simulated combat environments, where soldiers learn to depend on one another to achieve mission objectives, thereby strengthening the unit's collective efficacy. The traditional model presumes that without this shared experience, units are likely to suffer from weaker cohesion, reduced morale, and ultimately diminished combat effectiveness.

However, recent developments in military sociology and psychology have called attention to alternative mechanisms of cohesion that may operate in ad-hoc or volunteer units, which often lack the extended training and bonding time available to professionalized military forces. This emerging body of literature suggests that cohesion can still manifest in these units, albeit through different pathways than



those identified in conventional cohesion models. In particular, concepts such as “swift trust” and leadership-driven cohesion are gaining traction as explanatory frameworks for how cohesion might emerge quickly and effectively in newly formed combat units. This literature review synthesizes insights from the contemporary studies to frame a theoretical understanding of cohesion in spontaneous units like Ukraine’s volunteer battalions.

1.2. Swift Trust and temporary cohesion in combat settings

The concept of “swift trust” has emerged as a critical theoretical lens through which to understand cohesion in temporary or spontaneously formed military units. Originally developed within organizational behavior studies, *swift trust* describes a form of immediate trust that arises in temporary, high-stakes environments, where individuals lack the time to develop conventional trust through extended interactions. Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) first introduced this concept in the context of temporary work teams, suggesting that members in such groups rely on role expectations and shared goals as substitutes for interpersonal familiarity. This form of trust is typically seen in situations where the urgency of the shared task necessitates rapid trust formation, allowing individuals to focus on fulfilling their roles rather than on forming personal relationships.

In military settings, *swift trust* has been observed in coalition forces, where soldiers from different national and cultural backgrounds must collaborate under extreme conditions without the benefit of prior relationship-building. Research by Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari (2005) illustrates how *swift trust* can emerge in temporary Israeli combat units, where soldiers are often assigned to ad-hoc teams and must rely on each other despite limited prior interaction. This study found that in such settings, soldiers quickly adopt role-based trust, where they place confidence in their teammates’ abilities to fulfill assigned roles, regardless of interpersonal familiarity. The researchers noted that *swift trust* is facilitated by clear mission objectives, role definitions, and an overarching sense of purpose, which collectively provide a framework within which soldiers can act cohesively.

The relevance of *swift trust* to international volunteer units in Ukraine lies in its applicability to situations where soldiers come together without extensive training or prior association. In the absence of deep interpersonal bonds, Ukrainian volunteer soldiers may rely on role-based expectations and mission alignment to establish a functional level of trust. Swift trust thus enables these individuals to work cohesively, focusing on their shared objective of defending their nation. This concept is particularly significant in high-stakes combat environments, where survival depends on each member’s ability to perform their role effectively. Consequently, *swift trust* provides a mechanism through which volunteer units can achieve cohesion despite the absence of traditional trust-building processes.



1.3. The role of leadership and adaptation in emerging cohesion

Leadership has long been recognized as a crucial factor in building and maintaining cohesion within military units, and its importance becomes even more pronounced in volunteer units where peer cohesion may be underdeveloped (Bekesiene and Smaliukienė, 2022). In conventional military settings, leadership serves as a stabilizing influence, providing structure and guidance that reinforce cohesion through clear expectations and strategic direction. In volunteer units, however, the role of leadership extends beyond mere command, leaders often act as psychological anchors, offering consistency and unity in environments characterized by unpredictability and stress. Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022) explore this phenomenon in their study of cohesion in military training, highlighting how effective leaders can mitigate stress and foster resilience among soldiers who lack strong pre-existing bonds with one another.

For international volunteer units in Ukraine, leaders assume the dual role of combat guides and cohesion facilitators, compensating for the limited interpersonal connections within their units. Research suggests that in groups where soldiers lack extensive training together, leaders can create a shared sense of purpose and instill confidence by modeling resilience, setting clear goals, and maintaining morale (Griffith, 2002). This form of cohesion, which relies on vertical (leader-to-soldier) bonding rather than horizontal (peer-to-peer) bonds, can be instrumental in ensuring that volunteer soldiers act as a cohesive unit. Additionally, effective leadership in these settings has been shown to reduce the psychological burden on individual soldiers, as the presence of a trusted leader provides a focal point of stability amidst the chaos of combat.

Griffith's (2002) multilevel analysis of cohesion in military settings supports the notion that leadership can act as a substitute for peer bonding in units with low horizontal cohesion. His findings indicate that soldiers who report higher trust and alignment with their leaders tend to experience a stronger sense of unit cohesion, even when peer bonds are weaker. This leadership-driven cohesion is particularly beneficial in high-stress environments, where soldiers rely on their leaders not only for tactical direction but also for psychological support. For Ukraine's international volunteer units, where soldiers may vary widely in terms of training and background, strong leadership can thus create a unifying force that enhances cohesion and combat readiness.

1.4. Stress as a catalyst for cohesion

The role of shared stress as a bonding agent in combat settings has been widely documented, suggesting that stressful experiences can foster solidarity among soldiers, even in the absence of prior relationships. Research by Bekesiene et al. (2022) on stress resilience in military settings indicates that the shared experience



of stress can lead to a form of cohesion based on collective resilience. In high-stakes situations, soldiers often develop an implicit understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses as they navigate challenging environments together. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "combat bonding", allows individuals to feel a sense of unity and reliance on each other that transcends personal familiarity.

For international volunteer units in Ukraine, shared exposure to combat stress likely serves as an alternative pathway to cohesion, as soldiers experience similar physical and psychological challenges in their mission to defend their country. The stress of combat creates a context in which individuals come to view each other as indispensable allies in a collective struggle. This shared hardship can foster a sense of empathy and mutual understanding, leading to a form of cohesion that is resilient and adaptive. Studies on stress and group cohesion in both military and non-military settings have shown that individuals who endure hardships together often develop lasting bonds based on their shared experiences, which can serve as a foundation for sustained group cohesion in combat scenarios (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari 2005).

In summary, the literature on military cohesion suggests that cohesion within spontaneous or volunteer units can emerge through alternative mechanisms, such as *swift trust*, leadership-driven cohesion, and shared stress experiences. These factors, while distinct from the traditional pathways to cohesion seen in professionalized armies, offer valuable insights into how volunteer units in conflicts like the Ukraine war can achieve effective group cohesion without extensive prior training or pre-existing relationships. This synthesis of theoretical frameworks provides a foundation for understanding the unique dynamics of cohesion in ad-hoc military formations, laying the groundwork for further exploration of these mechanisms in real-world conflict settings.

2. Methodology

This study employs a documentation analysis methodology to investigate the dynamics of group cohesion within spontaneously formed or volunteer military units, with a specific focus on the context of the Ukraine conflict. Documentation analysis, also known as document analysis, is a qualitative research method that involves systematically evaluating and synthesizing existing written materials, including academic articles, field studies, reports, and theoretical papers. This approach is particularly well-suited to research areas that are complex and multifaceted, as it allows for the consolidation of insights from a wide array of sources to form a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Bowen, 2009). In this study, documentation analysis enables the exploration of diverse perspectives and findings on military cohesion in unconventional or ad-hoc combat settings, where traditional training and bonding processes may be absent.



Rationale for Documentation Analysis

The selection of documentation analysis as the primary research method in this study is motivated by several key factors. First, the use of secondary data sources is essential when examining an ongoing conflict, such as the Ukraine war, where direct field research and empirical data collection can be logistically challenging, risky, or impractical. By drawing on existing literature from relevant military contexts, documentation analysis provides a way to access established findings, theoretical frameworks, and observational insights that can inform an understanding of group cohesion in similar emergent combat situations. Given the ongoing and dynamic nature of the Ukraine conflict, in such circumstances, utilizing YouTube interviews with international volunteers provides a valuable alternative for accessing firsthand perspectives and experiences. These interviews offer insights into the lived realities of individuals involved in the conflict, contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation, such as group cohesion and adaptation within international volunteer units. While acknowledging the potential limitations of user-generated content, it is crucial to recognize that in situations of limited access, such as active conflict zones, YouTube interviews can serve as a valuable source of qualitative data, offering unique perspectives that might otherwise be inaccessible to researchers.

While traditional research often relies on controlled environments and direct data collection, the rise of digital platforms like YouTube has opened new avenues for qualitative research (Sharma, 2023). A systematic review of public health research utilizing YouTube data demonstrated the platform's increasing use in academic inquiry. This shift is particularly relevant in situations where conventional research methods are impractical or pose safety risks, such as ongoing conflicts. YouTube provides a readily accessible repository of firsthand accounts, enabling researchers to gather diverse perspectives and experiences that might otherwise be unattainable (Burgess, 2009) Furthermore, the platform's accessibility allows for the examination of evolving situations and dynamic social interactions, offering valuable insights into public perceptions and individual experiences in real-time. By adhering to ethical guidelines and critically evaluating the information presented, YouTube can be a valuable tool for qualitative research, particularly in contexts where traditional methods are limited. This approach also allows for the integration of perspectives from different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, and military science, which collectively offer a nuanced understanding of cohesion mechanisms.

Secondly, given the complexity of the topic, which involves psychological, social, and structural dimensions of group dynamics, documentation analysis offers flexibility in synthesizing evidence across various domains. This methodology facilitates a holistic view of how cohesion might emerge in volunteer units, exploring



not only interpersonal factors (such as trust and bonding) but also organizational and situational factors (such as leadership and stress). Through documentation analysis, this study aims to construct a well-rounded, evidence-based perspective on cohesion in ad-hoc military formations, synthesizing knowledge that may be applicable to volunteer units beyond the Ukraine context.

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

In line with best practices in documentation analysis, this study adheres to a structured approach to data collection, focusing on peer-reviewed scholarly journals articles, military reports, and theoretical papers that explore cohesion within both conventional and unconventional military units. The initial phase of data collection involved a comprehensive search across academic databases, including PROQUEST Central, CABI Digital Library ebooks, Elsevier Ebooks, Emerald eBooks Collection, JSTOR, Wiley Ebooks, and Google Scholar, using keywords such as “military group cohesion” (31953 results), “swift trust”, (60,370 results) “volunteer units”, (289,470 results) “leadership in combat”, (121,413 results) and “stress and bonding in military” (10,196 results). This search yielded a broad array of sources, which were subsequently screened for relevance based on their methodological rigor, thematic focus, and applicability to the research topic. After applying all the filter criteria, a total of 21 articles and reports were selected.

The inclusion criteria for sources in this analysis emphasized works that met the following conditions:

1. Direct relevance to military cohesion: selected sources primarily focus on cohesion within military or paramilitary units, particularly in relation to social and task cohesion, leadership dynamics, and resilience under stress.
2. Relevance to Ad-Hoc or volunteer units: given the focus on volunteer units in Ukraine, priority was given to studies that explore cohesion in unconventional military settings, such as military international volunteers, spontaneously assembled units, coalition forces, or units formed under temporary, high-stakes conditions.
3. Use of empirical or observational evidence: although theoretical papers were included to provide foundational concepts, sources containing empirical findings whether through field studies, observational research, or documented case studies were prioritized to enhance the validity and applicability of the analysis.
4. Diversity of perspectives: to ensure a well-rounded synthesis, this study incorporated sources from various disciplines, including military sociology, psychology, and organizational behavior. This interdisciplinary approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of cohesion mechanisms applicable to volunteer units.

Following the initial selection, each document was subjected to a critical appraisal to assess its methodological quality, theoretical grounding, and relevance



to the study's objectives. Documents that demonstrated strong methodological rigor and relevant insights on cohesion mechanisms were categorized and coded based on key themes, such as swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress as a bonding agent. These themes were identified based on the frequency and prominence of related terms in the literature, as well as their theoretical relevance to cohesion in volunteer military units.

For the interviews presented on the YouTube platform, in order to mitigate the confirmation bias and the risk of propaganda, in order to ensure the data reliability, only YouTube channels that were created before February 2022 were considered for inclusion. This criterion was established to exclude channels that may have been specifically created for wartime information campaigns or propaganda dissemination. By selecting content from pre-existing channels with a history of diverse content, the study aims to enhance the authenticity and neutrality of the narratives analyzed. Additionally, the number of followers of a channel was considered as a secondary verification factor since YouTube employs engagement-based algorithms and verification processes that prioritize content from established creators. Channels with a significant follower base are more likely to undergo stricter content authentication by the platform, reducing the likelihood of misinformation or fabricated narratives. However, to maintain balance, smaller channels with verifiable pre-war content were also considered to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. I selected a number of five interviews and transcribed them with timestamps, a total time of around 380 minutes using Otter.ai, an automated speech-to-text application known for its relatively high accuracy and efficiency. The initial machine-generated transcripts were then manually reviewed and corrected to ensure fidelity to the speakers' original statements.

Analytical framework

The analysis of selected documents was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach, which allows for the identification and integration of key themes across diverse sources. Thematic synthesis is particularly suitable for qualitative documentation analysis, as it facilitates the organization of complex information into coherent themes that reflect the primary concerns of the research question (Thomas & Harden, 2008, 45). In this study, thematic synthesis was used to categorize and interpret findings on cohesion mechanisms, with a focus on understanding how cohesion can emerge in units without traditional training structures.

The analysis proceeded through three main stages:

1. Coding of key concepts: each document (from the selected total of 21 articles and reports) was reviewed in detail, and relevant concepts were coded based on their thematic alignment with cohesion mechanisms in emergent military units. Coding categories included terms such as “swift trust”, “role-based trust”, “leader-driven



cohesion”, “stress bonding”, and “combat motivation”. This initial coding facilitated the identification of recurrent themes and patterns across sources.

2. Synthesis of themes: after coding, the findings were grouped into broader themes that aligned with the main research focus. For example, findings related to rapid trust formation were synthesized under the theme of “swift trust”, while discussions of leader influence on group unity were organized under “leadership-driven cohesion”. This thematic synthesis allowed for the consolidation of insights across studies, providing a structured narrative on the ways in which cohesion develops in volunteer units.

3. Interpretation and integration: in the final stage, synthesized themes were interpreted within the context of the Ukraine international volunteer units, with particular attention to how documented cohesion mechanisms might apply to combat groups with minimal prior training or established relationships. This interpretative phase also involved comparing findings from traditional military units with those of ad-hoc groups, identifying both commonalities and unique dynamics.

The thematic review of 21 peer-reviewed articles provided the conceptual foundation for analyzing the interview transcripts with international volunteer fighters. Key themes such as swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress-induced bonding, were identified in the literature and then operationalized as coding categories. Each relevant segment of the interview data was compared to these themes in order to evaluate whether the volunteers’ experiences confirmed, contradicted, or enriched existing theoretical perspectives. In other words, the reviewed articles functioned as an analytical lens that guided how we interpreted and grouped the volunteers’ narratives. This approach enabled to ground the findings in established scholarly work while also allowing new or unexpected insights from the interview data to refine and extend those theoretical frameworks.

Limitations of documentation analysis

While documentation analysis offers a practical and flexible approach to studying cohesion in volunteer units, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary sources means that this study is constrained by the scope and quality of available research, which may not fully capture the nuances of cohesion dynamics in the specific context of the Ukraine conflict. Additionally, the extrapolation of findings from studies on traditional military units to volunteer forces may introduce biases, as these units operate under different organizational, cultural, and structural conditions, especially the “International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine” (The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 2024). To mitigate these limitations, this study has carefully selected sources that closely align with the characteristics of volunteer units and has integrated insights from a variety of military settings to strengthen the applicability of the findings.



It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with the YouTube interviews analyzed in this study. While a curated selection of channels was employed to mitigate potential biases, the inherent subjectivity of user-generated content and the potential for editing or manipulation cannot be entirely discounted. The transcripts generated from these interviews, while meticulously created, represent an interpretation of spoken language, and nuances or contextual cues may be lost in the transcription process. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by online platforms may influence the candor or accuracy of the information shared by interviewees. These limitations underscore the need for careful consideration and critical analysis of the YouTube data within the broader context of the study's methodology.

Despite these limitations, documentation analysis remains a valuable methodology for synthesizing existing knowledge on military cohesion, particularly in contexts where direct field research is not feasible (Bowen, 2009). By systematically examining and integrating findings from multiple studies, this approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the unique cohesion mechanisms that may enable volunteer units to function effectively in combat environments. The insights derived from this analysis aim to contribute to the broader discourse on military cohesion, offering potential applications for military planners, policymakers, and researchers interested in the dynamics of emergent combat groups.

3. Analysis

The analysis of cohesion within international volunteer units in military contexts, particularly those like the volunteer forces in Ukraine, highlights several adaptive mechanisms that allow cohesion to form even in the absence of prolonged training or pre-existing interpersonal bonds. Drawing from themes identified in the literature, this section examines three primary mechanisms that underpin cohesion in these units: *swift trust*, *leadership-driven cohesion*, and *stress-induced bonding*. These variables represented the main purpose of understanding and analyzing the interviews with the volunteer fighters in Ukraine. Each mechanism provides a unique pathway for building unity and operational effectiveness, enabling volunteer soldiers to function as cohesive units despite limited preparatory time. Together, these factors create a framework for understanding how cohesion manifests and operates in spontaneously assembled combat units.

In traditional military settings, trust is typically built over time through shared experiences, rigorous training, and gradual development of interpersonal bonds. However, in emergent or temporary units such as volunteer groups formed under crisis conditions there is rarely sufficient time for these processes to unfold. In such cases, the concept of “swift trust” becomes essential. In the military context, swift trust has been observed in various ad-hoc settings, including coalition forces



and temporary combat units, where soldiers from different backgrounds and with minimal prior association must collaborate effectively under extreme conditions. Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari (2005) highlight how *swift trust* functions as a substitute for traditional trust in Israeli military units formed temporarily for specific missions. According to their findings, soldiers in these units do not rely on personal bonds but instead place trust in their teammates' roles and the shared objective of the mission. This phenomenon has been mirrored in other studies, which suggest that when soldiers understand their roles and believe in the collective mission, they are more likely to assume mutual reliability, thus fostering a rapid yet functional level of trust.

In the context of the Ukraine conflict, swift trust likely plays a central role in the cohesion of volunteer units. Many of these units comprise individuals with diverse backgrounds former civilians, reservists, and even foreign fighters brought together under the urgent need to defend their nation. Without the benefit of extensive training or pre-existing bonds, these volunteers rely on the role-based expectations inherent in swift trust. In these settings, individuals trust their teammates not necessarily because of interpersonal familiarity but because they share a common purpose, a clear understanding of roles, and a commitment to the overarching goal of defending Ukraine. This trust is further reinforced by the high-stakes nature of their mission, which creates a sense of urgency and collective responsibility that facilitates quick adaptation to group dynamics.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering cohesion within volunteer military units, particularly in contexts where horizontal (peer-to-peer) bonds are either weak or underdeveloped. In conventional military settings, leadership functions as one of several cohesion-building mechanisms, complementing the interpersonal relationships cultivated through shared training and operational experience. However, in volunteer or emergent units, leadership often assumes a central role, compensating for the absence of pre-existing interpersonal connections. Research by Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022) underscores the critical function of leadership in military training environments, highlighting that effective leaders act as psychological anchors, providing stability, direction, and motivation to soldiers who lack well-established bonds with their peers.

The experiences of volunteers further illustrate the essential nature of leadership in cohesion formation, particularly in units where conventional structures are less defined (Garand Thumb, 2024; Lindybeige, 2022, 2023; WarLeaks – Military Blog, 2024a, 2024b). One volunteer's appreciation for his competent platoon commander (Lindybeige, 2022, 34:22-35:01) exemplifies how strong leadership contributes to unit stability and morale, stating: "The presence of capable leaders played a significant role in shaping unit cohesion. One volunteer described his platoon commander as 'intelligent, competent, professional, and a nice bloke'". This observation aligns with



findings by Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022), who emphasize that leaders serve as stabilizing influences, fostering resilience and cohesion among soldiers with limited prior connections.

Furthermore, the role of experienced military personnel in training and structuring international volunteer units is crucial in enhancing cohesion and operational effectiveness. The presence of a seasoned Canadian Colonel, who provided instruction aligned with NATO standards, significantly contributed to the professionalism and confidence of volunteer soldiers. As one volunteer remarked: “Experienced leaders contributed significantly to the training and development of volunteer units. The presence of a “Canadian Colonel... helped train us to NATO standards’ fostered a sense of professionalism and instilled confidence in the volunteers, enhancing unit cohesion and effectiveness” (Lindybeige, 2022, 49:50-50:23). This observation aligns with the work of Wei et al. (2024), which suggests that leadership exerts a significant influence on military unit performance, particularly in fostering a shared understanding of objectives and reinforcing collective responsibility.

The impact of decisive leadership on combat effectiveness and unit safety is further illustrated by an incident described by a volunteer. While serving as a patrol leader, he made the critical decision to relocate his team to a safe position after detecting an enemy drone, likely preventing casualties from an impending artillery strike (Garand Thumb, 2024, 29:10-30:11). He recounted: “As the patrol leader, I made a call... go ahead and boogie back a couple hundred meters to our last hard cover position... about 20 seconds after getting off that point... that whole area just gets smashed by 120mm mortars”. This account supports research on leadership-driven cohesion in military environments, which highlights that effective leaders promote unity and stability by setting clear expectations, making decisive judgments under pressure, and prioritizing team safety. In this instance, the leader’s rapid decision-making and tactical awareness not only safeguarded his unit but also reinforced trust in his leadership, thereby strengthening overall cohesion.

In international volunteer units, where soldiers may come from disparate backgrounds and possess varying levels of military experience, leaders are tasked with uniting these individuals around a shared purpose. Leaders in these contexts fulfill multiple functions that contribute to cohesion. They set clear expectations, model resilience under stress, and reinforce the group’s mission, thereby fostering a sense of unity and purpose among team members. Griffith’s (2002) multilevel analysis of military cohesion further supports the idea that in situations of low peer bonding, strong leadership can create a “vertical cohesion” that binds the group. This vertical cohesion is especially beneficial in high-stress environments, where soldiers rely on their leaders not only for tactical guidance but also for psychological support.

In the Ukraine conflict, leaders in international volunteer units are often informal figures, including veterans or individuals with prior military experience, who assume



responsibility for organizing and directing operations. The leadership style in such units tends to be adaptive and participatory, allowing leaders to respond flexibly to the unique needs and challenges of volunteer forces (Wei et al. 2024). These leaders create cohesion by setting clear operational goals, encouraging camaraderie, and promoting resilience among team members. In addition, the presence of a strong, dependable leader provides a central figure around whom volunteers can rally, instilling confidence and reinforcing the group's commitment to their shared mission. Leadership-driven cohesion thus becomes a vital source of stability and purpose in volunteer units, enabling them to operate cohesively in the absence of extensive peer bonds.

Combat environments are inherently stressful, and shared exposure to stress can serve as a powerful bonding mechanism among soldiers. The concept of stress-induced bonding is well-documented in military psychology, with studies indicating that soldiers who endure hardships together often develop a unique form of solidarity based on mutual understanding and collective resilience. Bekesiene et al. (2022) explore this phenomenon in their study of stress resilience in military units, finding that shared experiences of stress can foster cohesion by creating a sense of collective identity and reliance on one another for support. In environments characterized by constant threat and high physical demands, soldiers often bond over the shared experience of navigating these challenges, which fosters a sense of unity and mutual respect.

One of the volunteers provides compelling evidence of stress-induced bonding, where shared experiences of hardship and adversity create strong bonds among individuals. His description of the missile attack and the subsequent efforts to help injured comrades and find his friends (Lindybeige, 2022, 13:14-14:20) illustrates the potential for traumatic events to foster unity and mutual reliance. Shared traumatic experiences, such as enduring a missile attack, fostered strong bonds among the volunteers. The volunteer described the chaotic aftermath of the attack, where they “were all running around trying to find our mates and providing support to those in need. This shared adversity likely contributed to a sense of unity and mutual reliance, characteristic of stress-induced bonding”. This aligns with research by Bekesiene et al. (2022) on stress resilience in military settings, which suggests that shared experiences of stress can lead to a form of cohesion based on collective resilience and a sense of shared identity. Furthermore, the volunteer's experience of contracting Lyme disease and witnessing the widespread illness among his comrades (Lindybeige, 2022, 46:29-48:41) further illustrates how shared stressors, even beyond direct combat, can contribute to bonding. This aligns with research on stress and social bonding in rats, which found that moderate stress increased social support-seeking behavior and facilitated long-term sharing of resources. In the context of the Ukraine conflict, these shared hardships likely fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among the volunteers. Another volunteer describes a combat



scenario where his partner experienced a weapon malfunction, but continued to push forward and rejoined the fight as soon as the issue was resolved. This demonstrates the resilience and mutual support fostered by stress-induced bonding. “My partner had a malfunction... he continues moving behind me... fixes that problem and gets right back in the fight... he isn’t like ‘hey buddy I’m back in the fight’ it’s just up and bang bang bang.” (Garand Thumb, 2024, 46:14 - 47:10). This aligns with research on stress-induced bonding in combat settings, which suggests that soldiers who endure challenging situations together often develop a deep sense of camaraderie and mutual reliance. In this case, the shared experience of combat and the partner’s determination to rejoin the fight likely strengthened their bond and contributed to the unit’s overall cohesion.

For Ukraine’s international volunteer units, shared exposure to the stresses of combat likely acts as a key driver of cohesion. Many volunteers enter the conflict with little formal training or prior combat experience, facing intense physical and psychological demands from the outset. The shared experience of navigating these challenges creates a powerful sense of empathy and understanding among unit members, as they recognize that they are all enduring the same hardships in pursuit of a common goal. This shared stress experience serves as a foundation for bonding, creating a form of cohesion that is both resilient and adaptive. Research on stress and cohesion suggests that individuals who undergo intense, life-threatening experiences together often develop bonds that persist even in the absence of traditional interpersonal familiarity (Bekesiene and Smaliukienė 2022).

The concept of “combat bonding” further illuminates this mechanism. Combat bonding refers to the intense solidarity that develops among soldiers who face danger together, often described as a “band of brothers” effect. This bond is reinforced by the high-stakes nature of combat, where each individual’s survival depends on the competence and support of their teammates. For international volunteer units in Ukraine, combat bonding may manifest as a profound sense of unity, driven by the mutual recognition of shared risk and the reliance on each other’s contributions to the mission. Unlike traditional units, where cohesion may develop gradually, volunteer units achieve a form of “instant cohesion” through the shared experience of combat stress, which fosters a unique resilience and commitment to the group.

The cohesion mechanisms observed in volunteer units contrast in significant ways with those in traditional military units. In conventional settings, cohesion is built through long-term training and the development of interpersonal bonds that provide a stable foundation for teamwork and trust. These units typically rely on a combination of social cohesion, based on personal familiarity, and task cohesion, based on collective mission objectives. By contrast, volunteer units are often composed of individuals who lack shared history or extensive training, necessitating reliance on alternative forms of cohesion.



Swift trust allows for rapid trust formation based on role expectations rather than personal familiarity, providing a functional level of trust that enables immediate cooperation. Leadership-driven cohesion compensates for the absence of horizontal bonds, with leaders serving as focal points of stability and unity. Finally, stress-induced bonding reinforces cohesion through the shared experience of hardship, creating a form of empathy and mutual reliance that supports the group's resilience. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how cohesion can emerge adaptively in volunteer units, enabling them to function effectively in combat despite limited preparatory time and established interpersonal connections. A volunteer exemplifies the concept of *swift trust*, where individuals in temporary, high-stakes environments rapidly develop trust based on shared goals and role expectations, rather than personal familiarity. This is evident in his description of forming a group with strangers at the airport (Lindybeige, 2022, 0:34-1:08): "We sort of formed this little group... everyone's a bit nervous... but they were so nice... they gave us cigarettes and stuff". This aligns with Meyerson et al.'s (1996) research on *swift trust*, which highlights the role of initial assumptions of trustworthiness and the importance of early positive interactions in fostering trust within temporary groups. Despite the inherent uncertainty and potential risks, the volunteers quickly formed a bond based on their shared purpose and initial acts of camaraderie. Furthermore, the volunteer's account of trusting his Georgian comrades who had acquired weapons through unconventional means (Lindybeige, 2022, 19:37-20:11) demonstrates the reliance on role-based trust in challenging situations. This aligns with Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari's (2005) findings on *swift trust* in Israeli combat units, where soldiers rely on their teammates' abilities to fulfill assigned roles, regardless of personal familiarity. In this case, the urgency of the situation and the shared goal of self-defence facilitated trust in the Georgians' competence, despite their unorthodox methods.

Another volunteer emphasizes the importance of maintaining spacing between soldiers during patrols to mitigate the risk of shared casualties from mines and explosives. This demonstrates a practical application of *swift trust*, where soldiers rely on their comrades to adhere to safety procedures, even in the absence of close personal bonds. "Spacing between guys... is standard... to mitigate threat of exploding ordinance... if you've got 5-10m spacing you know that if a guy 5-10m in front of you gets hit the chances are that shrapnel is not coming life-threateningly close to you". (Garand Thumb, 2024, 33:22 - 33:54). This checks with research on *swift trust* in high-risk environments, which suggests that individuals rely on shared expectations and adherence to protocols to establish trust quickly, enabling them to function effectively as a unit. In this case, the shared understanding of the danger posed by mines and the adherence to spacing protocols fosters trust and enhances unit safety.

The analysis reveals that cohesion within volunteer units such as those in Ukraine emerges through alternative mechanisms that adapt to the constraints of



rapid mobilization and diverse member backgrounds. Swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress as a bonding agent each play a vital role in facilitating unit cohesion, compensating for the lack of traditional bonding time. This model of emergent cohesion demonstrates that, while volunteer units may lack the depth of interpersonal relationships seen in traditional units, they can still achieve functional and resilient cohesion through adaptive mechanisms. These findings underscore the flexibility of cohesion as a construct, illustrating its capacity to manifest in varied forms across different military contexts.

In conclusion, the cohesion mechanisms observed in volunteer units are not merely substitutes for traditional forms of bonding but are uniquely suited to the urgent, high-stakes nature of ad-hoc combat units. By leveraging swift trust, effective leadership, and shared stress experiences, volunteer units can build a strong sense of unity and mission focus, enabling them to operate cohesively in challenging environments. This adaptive model of cohesion has significant implications for military strategy and organizational behaviour, suggesting that cohesion is not solely dependent on extensive training or personal familiarity but can emerge rapidly through the alignment of roles, goals, and shared experiences in crisis situations.

Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that group cohesion within volunteer military units, particularly those assembled in crisis contexts like the Ukraine conflict, emerges through alternative mechanisms that compensate for the absence of conventional training and bonding processes. This documentation analysis identifies three primary pathways: swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress-induced bonding, that collectively enable volunteer units to operate effectively and cohesively despite their lack of traditional preparation. Each of these mechanisms provides unique insights into how cohesion can be fostered quickly and adaptively in ad-hoc combat environments, challenging the assumption that extensive interpersonal familiarity is a prerequisite for effective group functioning in military settings.

Swift trust allows volunteer soldiers to establish immediate functional trust, which is based on role expectations and shared mission objectives rather than personal familiarity. This form of trust is particularly suited to temporary, high-stakes settings where there is no time to build relationships gradually. In the Ukraine conflict, swift trust facilitates rapid adaptation to group dynamics, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to work together toward a common goal.

Leadership-driven cohesion plays a crucial role in units where horizontal peer bonding is limited. Leaders in volunteer units act as unifying figures, providing structure, modeling resilience, and promoting a shared sense of purpose. This vertical cohesion compensates for the absence of extensive peer bonds and enhances



unit stability and morale, making leadership a central component of cohesion in ad-hoc military groups.

Stress as a bonding agent further strengthens cohesion within volunteer units by creating a sense of shared hardship and mutual reliance. The experience of combat stress fosters empathy and collective resilience, leading to a “combat bonding” effect that underpins unit solidarity. This mechanism aligns with theories of “combat motivation” and illustrates how challenging experiences can foster deep, lasting bonds, even in newly formed groups.

The insights from this study carry significant implications for military strategy, particularly in the organization and deployment of volunteer or ad-hoc combat units. Military planners and commanders can benefit from understanding that cohesion in volunteer units can be fostered through adaptive mechanisms that do not require extended training periods. Emphasizing swift trust and providing clear role definitions can facilitate rapid trust formation among soldiers. Additionally, assigning experienced leaders to these units can create a focal point for unity and morale, which is essential for maintaining operational effectiveness in the absence of strong peer bonds.

These findings also suggest that organizational approaches to military cohesion need to be flexible, recognizing that cohesion is not a one-size-fits-all construct. The adaptive model of cohesion observed in volunteer units underscores the potential for cohesion to emerge under varied conditions, which has implications for both military and non-military organizations that operate in crisis environments. For instance, emergency response teams, humanitarian missions, and crisis intervention groups could adopt similar cohesion-building strategies, leveraging swift trust and leadership-driven unity to enhance group performance in time-sensitive situations.

Understanding the cohesion mechanisms at play in volunteer units can inform psychological support services designed to support soldiers in ad-hoc combat environments. Recognizing the role of stress as a bonding agent, for example, can guide the development of resilience-building programs that encourage mutual reliance and group support among soldiers. Additionally, training programs could focus on developing adaptive leadership skills that enable leaders to foster cohesion quickly, even in diverse and untrained groups.

The insights from this study may also have implications for mental health care providers working with veterans from volunteer units or other ad-hoc military formations. The unique dynamics of cohesion in these units relying heavily on stress bonding and swift trust may lead to distinct psychological experiences compared to those of traditional units. Mental health interventions could be tailored to acknowledge the intense bonds formed through shared stress, which may impact veterans’ post-deployment adjustment, social reintegration, and resilience.

While this study provides a foundational understanding of cohesion mechanisms in international volunteer units, further research is needed to expand and refine these



findings. Empirical field studies in active or post-conflict settings could provide observational data on how cohesion manifests in volunteer units, enabling researchers to validate and potentially refine the concepts of swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress bonding. Such studies could also explore the long-term durability of these bonds, investigating whether the cohesion formed through swift trust and shared stress persists over time or diminishes after the immediate crisis has passed.

Future research might also examine how cohesion mechanisms in international volunteer units influence combat effectiveness and psychological well-being, comparing these outcomes to those observed in traditional military units. Exploring these comparisons could reveal whether adaptive cohesion models offer advantages in specific combat scenarios or have implications for post-combat resilience and veteran mental health. Additionally, studying cohesion across a range of cultural and organizational contexts could help determine whether these findings can be generalized to other situations, such as international peacekeeping forces or multinational coalitions.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that group cohesion within volunteer military units is both achievable and adaptable, arising through mechanisms that align with the unique demands of crisis-driven combat environments. The adaptive model of cohesion encompassing swift trust, leadership-driven unity, and stress-based bonding provides a pathway for ad-hoc units to form effective, resilient teams, despite limited training or pre-existing relationships. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of military cohesion, illustrating the flexibility and resilience of soldiers in spontaneous combat formations. As volunteer forces and ad-hoc military groups become increasingly relevant in contemporary conflict settings, understanding and harnessing these cohesion mechanisms will be critical for military strategy, organizational behavior, and psychological support services.

The findings presented in the study highlight the dynamic nature of cohesion, revealing that even in the most challenging conditions, individuals can come together to form strong, united teams through shared purpose, adaptive leadership, and collective resilience. This adaptability not only underscores the human capacity for cohesion under pressure but also offers practical guidance for supporting and organizing combat units that may be called upon to respond to future crises with minimal preparation.

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RUSSIA'S USE OF PMCS AS A FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT IN MALI POST 2021

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Following successive coups in 2020 and 2021, Mali faced a deteriorating security situation, exacerbated by the withdrawal of French troops and UN peacekeepers. The vacuum created has allowed external actors, namely Russia, to exert influence. The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), has played a prominent role in Mali since 2021, providing military support and advancing Russian strategic interests. The article examines the legal and operational framework of PMCs, with a focus on Russia, and compares their role in foreign policy to similar entities from the United States and China. Mali's rich natural resources and strategic location make it a focal point in global power dynamics, while the dependence on PMCs raises critical questions regarding sovereignty, security and exploitation by other foreign powers. By analyzing these issues, the article sheds light on the implications of the private military companies involvement in fragile states and their use as instruments of geopolitical influence.

Keywords: *Wagner; African Corps; Mali; PMC; Mercenaries; Foreign Policy.*

Introduction

Private military companies (PMCs) are increasingly present worldwide and represent a threat to international security. According to a report of the Council of the European Union, since 1980 there has been a steady increase in the number of the PMCs driven by several factors, and in 2010 the total workforce of these companies was higher than the number of US troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Analysis and Research Team, 2023). The same report shows that year after year the

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number of the private military companies has increased, and by 2020 there were approximately 1200 of these companies worldwide (see Figure no.1). According to a report of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2018, states must pay more attention and due diligence to countering the actions of private military and security companies which violate human rights, while mentioning that the number of these companies is growing at a transitional level, whether they are present in armed conflicts or in peacetime situations (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). In the report, the Working Group concludes that the experts' proposals for a new, realistic definition of mercenarism and for a binding international instrument regulating the actions of private military and security companies have faced substantial obstacles (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). One of the obstacle for a binding international instrument found by the Working Group is the dichotomy in the approaches of the states: some of the states want to enforce regulation of private military companies, while other states prefer a soft law response based on self-regulation. The same report mentions that general trends of privatisation of the use of force combined with a growing number of non-state actors in armed conflict will lead to more frequent human rights violations by these actors operating in a legal vacuum (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). Another report of the United Nations, dating back in 2021, acknowledges the rise of the private military and security companies in the context in which the humanitarian space is full of threats. In addition, the same report states that even humanitarian actors are seeking the expertise of these companies, while adding that some private military and security companies are present as combatants in armed conflicts (Working Group on Use of Mercenaries: the Increasing Number of Private Military and Security Companies Operating in the Humanitarian Space Exacerbates the Risk of Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, 2021). The report reiterates the lack of international legislation regulating private military companies and the need for a binding international framework. The report concludes that private military and security companies are increasingly present in humanitarian operations (Working Group on Use of Mercenaries: the Increasing Number of Private Military and Security Companies Operating in the Humanitarian Space Exacerbates the Risk of Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, 2021).

Currently, PMCs are being used by states worldwide for several reasons: they lack accountability, they are cheaper than traditional armies, they can be deployed around the world more quickly than state armies, and they act as force multipliers.



In the past, several PMCs from different states have come to public attention. Among these private military companies, the most well-known is the Russian Wagner Group or the African Corps, as it was renamed after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin (Bobin & Cam, 2024). The report of the Council of the European Union identified three different models for these private military companies from the cases of South Africa, the United States and Russia. The “South African model” is based on the modus operandi of Executive Outcomes PMC, whose strategy closely resembles that of traditional mercenaries by conducting military operations and financing their model through the resources of the country where they operate. The “US Blackwater model,” also seen as “military entrepreneurship”, is integrated in the traditional armed forces of a state, through subcontracting different tasks such as logistics. The third model identified is the “Wagner model” which integrates elements from both models, allowing the private military company to operate in such a way without having any respect for human rights or international law (Analysis and Research Team, 2023).

The purpose of this article is to present arguments on the fact that the Wagner Group is used in Mali as a foreign policy instrument by the Russian state. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject, the article employs a qualitative research methodology. It integrates data from multiple sources, including government documents, academic analyses, reports from international organization, and reputable news outlets. Primary data such as official statements and policy documents were analyzed to establish the legal and political framework in which PMCs operate. Secondary data, including case studies, expert commentaries, and journalistic investigations, were used to provide context and insights into the activities of the Wagner Group.

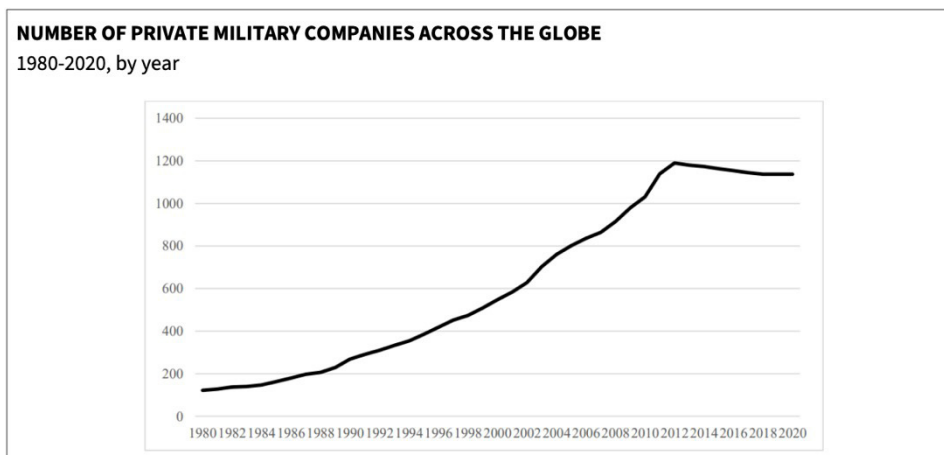


Figure no. 1: The increase of the number of private military companies between 1980 and 2020 (Source: The Council of the European Union)



1. General Background

The Republic of Mali is an African state situated in the Sahel region. It was a colony from 1892 until 1960, when it gained its independence from France. Currently, Mali is a fragile state facing significant internal security challenges, including terrorism, ethnic conflict and economic issues, according to various sources.

Furthermore, in recent years, several key events have taken place, which are important for the country's history and are also relevant to the security of Mali. In 2020, a military coup d'état took place, and the President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was forced to resign (Mugabi, 2020). In 2021, another military coup took place and the President, Prime Minister and the Defence Minister were detained (Lewis, 2021). A year later, the military government announced on state television that they thwarted a coup d'état (News Agencies, 2022).

In 2022, following the coups and due to internal instability in Mali, France decided to withdraw its last troops from the country, ending a nine-year operation (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2022). According to the Central Intelligence Agency, the French military ended its missions in citing problems with the ruling military government and the presence of Russian private military contractors (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024).

In addition, the United Nations withdrew its peacekeeping forces from Mali in 2023 at the request of the country foreign minister (United Nations, 2023). All these events led to a security vacuum that Russia eventually has tried to fill.

Another important aspect to bear in mind in order to understand the overall context in Mali is the fact that the country is very rich in natural resources, which are sought after by many other states. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Mali is the third largest producer of gold in Africa (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, n.d.). In addition to gold, the Republic of Mali also holds other natural resources, but according to the Central Intelligence Agency, although Mali has bauxite, iron ore, manganese, tin, and copper deposits, these are not being exploited (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024).

Russia's interest in Mali has been obvious since the 2021 coup, marked by the arrival of the Wagner Group, a private military company with Russian ties, in the country. As reported by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, the Russian military leased Wagner Group aircraft to facilitate the transportation of personnel and equipment to the African nation. The flight tracking data reveals that a Russian Air Force Tupolev TU-154 aircraft arrived in the Malian capital on 19 December 2021. This aircraft is part of the Russian Ministry of Defence's 223rd Flight Detachment and has previously contracted with Wagner-linked companies to facilitate the transportation of Wagner personnel in other African countries (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022).



In 2023, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Mali and pledged military support for the African state. During his visit he stated that Russia delivered “very large supplies of aviation equipment” that “significantly increased” the capability of local forces. Furthermore, Sergey Lavrov stated that “We will now be planning additional steps in the field of education through military higher educational institutions and in the field of supplies of weapons and military equipment,”. In contrast, his counterpart, Abdoulaye Diop, defended the relationship between Mali and Russia and stated that the collaboration with France “does not meet the objectives of Malians.” (NEWS WIRES, 2023).

2. An Overview of the International Legislation on PMCs, How Other States Use Private Military Companies and Why Do These Details Matter?

Throughout history, there have always been people who fought for money, known as mercenaries. Over the centuries this phenomenon has been constant until the 20th century, when the international community has decided to regulate mercenary activity and prohibit it. Despite this, as will be argued in the next paragraphs, it can be seen that the great powers have left themselves a loophole to use financially motivated individuals in their own interests.

Over the years, several documents addressing the topic of mercenarism have come into force. The first documents on mercenaries were the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the later Protocol I to the same Convention of 1977 (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). Also in 1977, another important document on mercenarism was signed, namely the “OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa”, which came into force in 1985 (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). In 1989, the UN document “International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries” was signed, and it entered into force in 2001 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). These are just some of the binding documents that regulate the use of mercenaries. However, none of these documents mention the use of private military companies.

Until the end of 2024, the only international document addressing the regulation of private military companies is the “The Montreux Document on Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States Related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies During Armed Conflict”. The Montreux Document initiative was launched by the Swiss government and the ICRC and was signed by 17 states on 17 September 2008. However, the document is non-binding and contains only relevant international legal obligations and good practices (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020).

Currently, according to the Montreux Document website, only 59 states have signed the document, and among the most influential states that have signed the



document are: The United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and China (The Montreux Document, n.d.). Although the document is non-binding, Russia has not even signed it, strengthening the fact that Russia is using private military companies as a foreign policy instrument. Therefore, it is quite obvious that the great powers do not want to regulate the private military companies because no binding international law was proposed, nor will it be ratified by states, as they are being used by the states in order to achieve their own national interest.

From another perspective, besides the lack of international legislation on private military companies, to acknowledge that indeed the private military companies are a foreign policy instrument we must look at things more into detail. More specific, by analyzing the statute of the PMCs in other states. Two of the best examples for this statement are the United States of America and China because they are the most influential states in the international system, and they are known to be using private military companies.

In the United States there is no law specifically designed to regulate the private military companies. Despite this, the American PMCs are regulated by the Arms Export Control Act, under which the State Department licenses these companies and monitors the implementation of contracts concluded with them (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). According to the Section 38 § 2778 (a)(1) of the Arms Export Control Act, the president is authorized to control the import and export of defence services in order to promote the foreign policy of the United States and shall provide foreign policy guidance to individuals involved in these kind of services (The United States Congress, 2023). According to 22 *CFR* § 120.32 - *Defense service*, the term “defense services” refers “to the furnishing of assistance (including training) to foreign persons, whether in the United States or abroad in the design, development, engineering, manufacture, production, assembly, testing, repair, maintenance, modification, operation, demilitarization, destruction, processing, or use of defense articles” (The United States Congress, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the private military companies from the United States are often led by high-ranking retirees from the Pentagon, the CIA and the State Department and their personnel are trained in the facilities of the Ministry of Defence (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). In the context of the Ukrainian war, the Russian MFA named several American private military companies present in Ukraine, which are used to promote the United States’ interest: Academi, DynCorp International, Cubic Corporation, Forward Observations Group and Sons of Liberty International (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

In the case of China, the fact that the private military companies are used as a foreign policy instrument is even more obvious. For example, The Regulation on the Administration of security services in China states that the Chinese authorities must



own 51% of the private military company in order for the company to be opened (Geocase, 2021). Moreover, the Article 78 of the Chinese National Security Law states that “State organs, mass organizations, enterprises, public institutions, and other social organizations shall cooperate with relevant departments in employing relevant security measures as required by national security efforts”, meaning that the Chinese private military companies are used in the interest of the Chinese state (Spearin, 2020).

These PMCs are often used to protect other Chinese companies and their lucrative projects overseas. For example, Dewei Security Group Limited offers its services in Africa to the China Road and Bridge Corporation, China National Petroleum Corporation and Chinese Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holdings (Spearin, 2020). According to Christopher Spearin’s article , among the reasons why these private military companies are used are: they offer a common working language (as their main clients are other Chinese firms), the cost is lower than other options, and the Chinese personnel are preferred over foreigners, given sensitivity to protecting the confidential information of state-owned enterprises, and the personnel with military, police or government experience background pass the loyalty test (Spearin, 2020). According to the report of the Council of the European Union mentioned in the Introduction, there was a constant growth in the Chinese private military companies, with an estimated 20 to 40 Chinese PMCs operating abroad, as their aim is to pursue the state’s economic and geopolitical interest along the Belt and Road Initiative (Analysis and Research Team, 2023).

Thus, according to the arguments presented, it can be concluded that currently there is no international legislation that regulates private military companies, and after analyzing the national legislation of the United States of America and China, it is obvious that these companies carry out their activity in the interest of the state, being used as a foreign policy instrument. Therefore, we must acknowledge the fact that other states, such as Russia, also use private military companies in their own interest, as a foreign policy instrument. In order to support this statement, a more detailed analysis of Russia’s national laws is necessary, as was done in previous cases.

3. The Situation of the Private Military Companies in Russia

To comprehend the role of private military companies as a foreign policy instrument employed by the Russian Federation, it is essential to examine the legislative framework governing this issue just as we did in the previous chapter. Furthermore, an analysis of the other Russian PMCs would provide valuable insights.

On initial examination of the Russian legislation that is intended to regulate private military companies, it becomes evident that the situation is far from straightforward. In accordance with Article 208 of the Criminal Code of the Russian



Federation it is illegal to create an armed formation and to participate in one that is not provided for by a federal law. In addition, article 309 of the Criminal Code prohibits mercenarism (Parliament of Russia, 1996). Despite the existing legal framework, the prohibition of private military companies is not explicitly mentioned. In an interview for France 24, Oleg Krinitsyn, the Director of RSB Group (one of the most known private military companies from Russia), stated that “Russia inherited its legal system from the Byzantine Empire, which means that whatever is not explicitly banned is legal” (France 24, 2015). Moreover, in the same YouTube video produced by France 24 in 2015, Dmitry Gorovtsov, a Russian MP from the A Just Russia Party, stated that his party had proposed legislation that would designate the Russian state as the primary beneficiary of private military companies operations (France 24, 2015). Even though a law has not yet been adopted to legalize the private military companies, there are indications that these entities are being utilized as an instrument of foreign policy by the Russian state.

In addition to the extant legal framework, a further issue that arises is that a conceptual distinction persists between mercenaries and private military companies. In accordance with the provisions set forth in Protocol I of the Geneva Convention, the term “mercenary” is defined as any individual who:

- a. is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
- b. does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;
- c. is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party;
- d. is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict;
- e. is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and
- f. has not been sent by a state which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces. (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.)

At the same time, the people who are working in the private military sector does not refer to themselves as mercenaries, but as contractors. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a contractor as “a person or company that signs a contract to supply materials or workers to perform a service or a job” or “someone who works or provides a service for a company for a limited period of time, but is not an employee”(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In light of the aforementioned conceptual differences between mercenaries and private military contractors, as well as the legal basis, two key points emerge: a) the Wagner Group and the other similar entities are not mercenary groups, but private military companies; b) according to the laws, the



Russian PMCs operate in a grey area, as they are not legal, nor illegal in the Russian Federation.

When analysing the other private military companies in Russia, we learn that all of them have something in common: they are linked to the Kremlin (see Figure no. 2). The largest OSINT Agency in Ukraine, Molfar, conducted an investigation on 37 Russian PMCs, looking for their source of funding and the type of subordination (Molfar, n.d.). The investigation concluded that 16% (6 PMCs) are/were financed by businessmen, including well-known ones, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin and Gennady Timchenko, and Oleg Deripaska; 67% (25 PMCs) have ties to Russian state institutions (Ministry of Defence, FSB, the government, the Russian Orthodox Church) through funding and management subordination, and another 17% (6 PMCs) have mixed types of funding, both public-private or from multiple private donors (see Figure no. 3) (Molfar, n.d.)

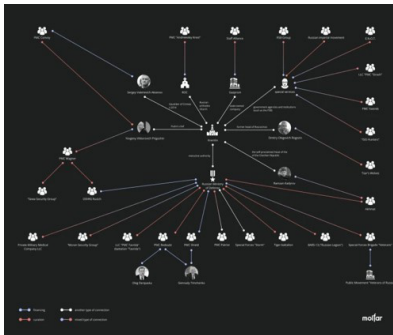


Figure no. 2: Russian PMCs linked to the Kremlin
(Source: Molfar)

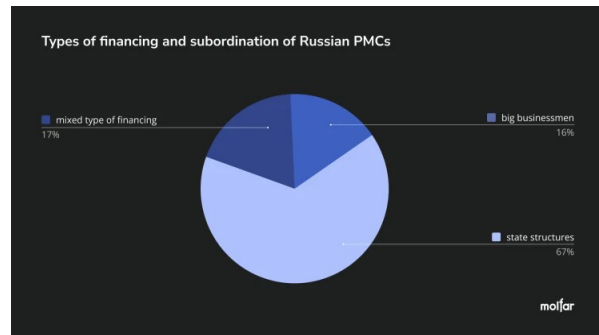


Figure no. 3: Russian PMCs's source of funding
(Source: Molfar)

After looking over the legal situation of the private military companies and knowing that most of them are linked to the Kremlin, and it can be stated that the Wagner Group operates under the Russian government will, as it is illegal to create an armed formation and to participate in one that is not provided for by a federal law. Moreover, according to some sources within Wagner, following the death of its leader, the Wagner Group operates under the Russian Ministry of Defence, and now the MoD no longer charges Wagner for the rented military transport vehicles (Giustozzi, 2024). Furthermore, at the end of June 2023, it was decided that Prigozhin enterprise would be divided: the domestic commercial enterprises were taken into possession by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), the communications businesses would be placed under the supervision of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), while the foreign military components would be placed under the control of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (Watling, Danylyuk, & Reynolds, 2024).



As reported by Al Jazeera, the command of Wagner's overseas operations was assigned to General Andrei Averyanov, a GRU officer (Cordall, 2024). Another piece of evidence that supports this statement is the fact that the Wagner Group operates a training near the location of the 10th Special Mission Brigade of GRU Spetsnaz in Mol'kino, Russia (Catrina Doxsee , 2022). According to the satellite imagery, the Wagner base includes approximately nine permanent structures of varying sizes and different vehicles are present in the facility (see Figure no. 4) (Catrina Doxsee , 2022). A report published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) states that between 2014 and 2023 the Wagner Group received contracts estimateddd at over \$10 billion from the Government of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, between May 2022 and May 2023, the Russian state allocated approximately \$1 billion for remuneration and compensation payments to Wagner's personnel. Additionally, the same report indicates that in Ukraine, the Wagner Group received a considerable number of heavy weapons from the Russian Ministry of Defence (Watling, Danylyuk, & Reynolds, 2024).

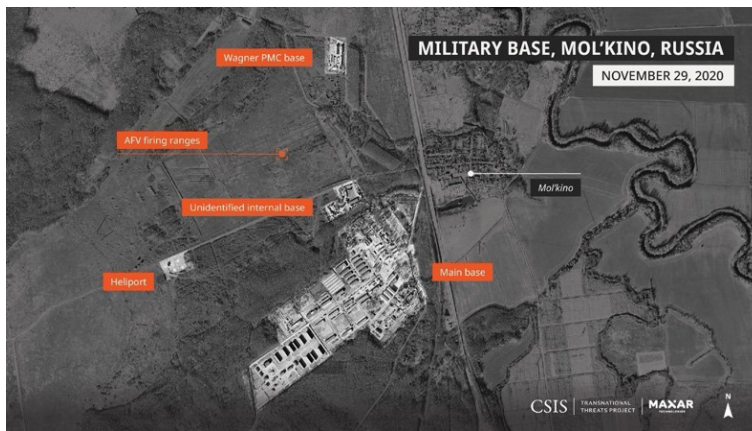


Figure no. 4: The Wagner Group base near the Mol'kino military base
(Source: Center for Strategic & International Studies)

4. The Presence of Russian PMCs in Mali

The Wagner Group is one of the most prominent Russian private military companies around the globe. The Russian company was created in 2014 by the ex-intelligence officer, Dmitry Utkin, and the businessman, Yevgeny Prigozhin, to engage in covert military operations outside of Russia (ACLED, 2024). Since its creation, the private military company has been involved in a number of conflicts worldwide.

The Republic of Mali is one of the main states in which the Wagner Group is known to be active. According to the Molfar investigation aforementioned, the



Wagner Group seems to be the only Russian private military company to operate in Mali (Molfar, n.d.). Since Wagner's arrival in this African state, a sufficient corpus of open-source information regarding the PMC has become available, aiming to provide an overall picture of the situation. Even though the Wagner Group leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was killed in 2023, the Russian PMC continues to operate in Mali under the name of the African Corps. According to a Royal United Services Institute report, this Russian private military company has been present in the African state since December 2021, and is still operating there as of March 2024 (Giustozzi, 2024).

In an analysis conducted by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, it was revealed that upon their arrival in Mali, Wagner troops initiated the construction of a base, which is presumed to be utilized by Russian and Wagner operatives in proximity to the exterior of Bamako's Modibo Keita International Airport (see Figure no. 5) (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022). In order to understand the overall picture, we must mention another important aspect, namely that according to a report published by the Royal United Services Institute, at the peak of the Wagner Group's operations in early 2023, the group had approximately 2,000 personnel deployed in Mali. By February 2024, the private military company had reduced its personnel to around 1,000. Additionally, the report also cites sources within the Russian PMC indicating that the group is unable to fulfil the Malian government's requests for supplementary assistance and is encountering challenges in replacing personnel. Nevertheless, the Russian authorities have indicated their intention to replace the Wagner Group in Mali with the Redut PMC (Giustozzi, 2024).

Moreover, in 2023, the United States alleged that the Wagner Group was responsible for destabilizing the Republic of Mali and was complicit in the withdrawal of United Nations peacekeepers from the country. Furthermore, the White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby, has stated that the United States has obtained information indicating that Mali's government has paid more than \$200 million to Wagner since late 2021 (Holland & Psaledakis, 2023). In the same year, a document was leaked that revealed that the Wagner Group met with "Turkish contacts" with the intention of purchasing weapons and equipment from Turkey. As indicated in the document, the Wagner Group intended to utilize the equipment in Mali and also planned to resume the recruitment of prisoners from Russia's jails (Cohen & Hansler, 2023).

Thus, after observing these aspects related to the presence of the Wagner Group in Mali, it is necessary to analyse its activities. According to a report of Foreign Policy Research Institute, the activities that the Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs carry out on the African continent include fake news and disinformation campaigns, military aid, and payment through mining and extractive industries (Parens, 2022). For example, the report mentions that Maxim Shugaley, an associate of Yevgeny Prigozhin, conducted a disinformation campaign through a public opinion



poll “purporting to show 87 percent support among Malians for the government’s outreach to Wagner” conducted by the Foundation for National Values Protection, an organization sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for disinformation activities (Parens, 2022). On the same topic of disinformation, the Wagner has solid operations. According to Le Monde, the group bought the loyalty of several media outlets across Africa. In the case of Mali, several media outlets were approached by the private military company to promote their interest by offering the journalists approximately 150 Euros for publishing an article (Cam, 2023). The same Le Monde article mentions that several anti-France protests from 2021 were finance by the Wagner Group with approximately 6,100 to 10,600 Euros each (Cam, 2023). In addition to the disinformation campaigns, the CSIS analysis aforementioned reveals that various social media accounts have shared images depicting Wagner troops engaged in training exercises with Malian forces (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022).



Figure no. 5: The suspected Wagner Group base outside the Modibo Keita International Airport (Source: Center for Strategic & International Studies)

As mentioned in the first chapter, Mali is a country rich in natural resources. Meanwhile, one of the Russian PMCs activities on the African continent revolve around mining and extractive industries. Dr Watling, Royal United Services Institute Senior Research Fellow, stated for BBC that the Wagner Group’s operating mode is standard for the Russian groups, in which the group covers its operating costs with other economic activities carried out in parallel, and in the case of the African states this is done through mining concessions (Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). According to the same BBC article, the Wagner Group managed to secure valuable natural resources in every country they operate. In February 2024, the Wagner Group managed to take control of the Intahaka, the largest artisanal gold mine in Mali, located near



the border with Burkina Faso, which was disputed for years by various armed groups such as CSP rebels and the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) (Agenzia Nova, 2024).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Wagner Group's activities in Mali exemplify its role as a critical instrument of Russian foreign policy in Africa. Since its arrival in late 2021, Wagner has not only provided military support to the Malian government but has also engaged in disinformation campaigns, resource extraction, and influence operations that consolidate Russian influence in the region. These operations reflect the group's broader strategy of leveraging economic, informational, and military tools to secure financial gains and political objectives. The group's involvement in mining and extractive industries highlights its reliance on local resources to sustain its operations, while its media and disinformation activities reveal its capacity to manipulate public opinion and undermine competing powers, such as France and the United States. Despite recent challenges, including personnel shortages and leadership changes, the Wagner Group remains a significant actor in Mali, shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region.

Conclusions

Throughout the article, several arguments were presented to support the statement that the Wagner Group or the African Corps is used in Mali as a foreign policy instrument by the Russian state. Moreover, after the analysis of the legal status of the private military companies not only in Russia, but in the United States of America and China, we can state that the PMCs are used as a foreign policy instrument by other states too. It is obvious that PMCs, though often operating in a legal grey area, serve the interests of the state by extending military influence, securing economic resources, and advancing political objectives without direct involvement of national armed forces.

The Russian Federation's approach to PMCs, particularly through the Wagner Group, illustrates a sophisticated model of utilizing such entities as tools of statecraft. Despite the absence of specific legal frameworks for PMCs in Russia, the connection between these groups and the Russian government is undeniable, with PMCs operating under state sanction or influence, particularly in conflict zones like Mali.

Mali's complex geopolitical landscape underscores the interplay between internal instability, resource wealth, and external influences. Following the years of domestic turmoil, including successive coups and the withdrawal of Western forces, the nation has experienced a growing security vacuum that external actors, particularly Russia, have sought to exploit. The arrival and continued presence of the Wagner Group in Mali exemplify the use of private military companies as tools of foreign policy, particularly by states like Russia, where such entities operate in



legal and operational grey areas. The Wagner Group's activities in Mali, ranging from military operations to disinformation campaigns and resource exploitation, demonstrate the multifaceted role of PMCs in expanding Russian influence in Africa. The involvement of PMCs in Mali, as well as in other parts of the world, highlights broader trends in global security dynamics. Countries such as the United States and China also leverage PMCs for strategic purposes, albeit under different regulatory frameworks and with varying degrees of state control. In the Russian context, the Wagner Group and its successors, now more explicitly aligned with the Kremlin's agenda, reveal a deliberate strategy to advance national interests abroad while maintaining plausible deniability. For Mali, the ramifications are profound. The reliance on PMCs such as Wagner reflects the Malian government's urgent need for security support but also deepens its dependency on foreign powers. This raises questions about sovereignty, long-term stability, and the potential for exploitation of Mali's natural resources. As Mali navigates these challenges, its experience serves as a cautionary tale of how weak states, rich in resources but mired in instability, can become arenas for global power struggles, with far-reaching implications for their people and sovereignty.

The lack of binding international regulations regarding PMCs reflects a broader reluctance by major powers to subject these entities to stringent oversight. As a result, while the role of PMCs in global conflicts is undeniable, the challenge remains for the international community to establish clear frameworks that regulate their activities and address the risks they pose to sovereignty, stability, and the international rule of law. Ultimately, the growing presence of PMCs in global conflict zones signals a fundamental shift in how states, particularly powerful ones like Russia, project military power and pursue their national interests. This shift highlights the need for a more comprehensive and binding international legal framework to address the increasing reliance on such entities and their impact on global peace and security.

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MILITARY STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN UKRAINE

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The paper analyzes the military strategic objectives of the Russian Federation during the three years of military operations in Ukraine.

Although most analysts tend to see the Russian Federation as dangerous because it has been imperial, thus irrational in a Nation's Age, the author of the article tends to see it having been engaging its military forces in operations meant to bring about only achievable military strategic objectives.

Should we compare the pictures – Russian Federation being irrational or rational – we believe that the latter is the more dangerous. On the one hand, while irrationality could cause grave threats to the other actors, it tends to cause the more serious danger to the irrational actor itself, danger provoked by all of the irrational costs. On the other hand, a rational approach will cause painful, unwanted, unplanned costs for the other actors, while bringing mostly strategic advantages to the Russian Federation.

Keywords: *national instruments of power; military strategic objectives; culminating point of victory; nuclear confrontation.*

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, started on February 24, 2022, lays in front of us a process going on for almost three years. And this is a conflict on which the media and a great number of pundits present information and analyses that will lead one to think the attacker is absolutely irrational, following three main thinking lines.

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Firstly, the two countries, we are suggested, or even told, have almost zero history of conflicts between them. Thus, it was illogical for the Russian Federation to start a conflict with Ukraine. In these times, a rational Russian Federation would have had its national interests better served by great investments in civilian economy areas, investments that would have improved the lifestyles of its citizens. What is more, Ukraine represents a zero-threat to the Russian Federation, making thus the Russian intent to attack even more irrational.

Secondly, the desired end state of the Russian Federation is irrational. The majority of strategic thinkers of our time believe that the Russian Federation is switching direction and is trying to become a tsarist entity, instead of continuing being the post-USSR state that the West was used to working and doing business with. Currently, it is trying to conquer and incorporate Ukraine. And this is only a first step. Thus, in a nationalist world, where conquering other countries is impossible, Russia is taking irrational decisions.

Thirdly, in a world where the relations between states of any kind are mostly sustained by diplomacy, the Russian Federation is mostly using its military instrument of power. And this is again irrational because diplomacy, for example, is vastly less costly than the aforementioned military instrument of power.

Given the fact that this is only an article, work that does not provide the necessary space to address all the points above, we will only focus on the third – the way the Russian Federation uses its military instrument of national power. Thus, we will focus on the way Russia defines its strategic military objectives in the conflict with Ukraine.

In order to make our research clear, the article will try to determine whether the military instrument is used rationally or not. Thus, the article will analyze if the following theory is right or not – *the Russian Federation is using its military instrument irrationally in its conflict with Ukraine*.

The scientific process that will provide a solid answer to this theory will be structured the following way. In the first place, we will provide information about the background history of the two entities – the Russian Federation and Ukraine – that is important for understanding the overall situation. Secondly, we will describe the most important theoretic information, absolutely necessary to understand the current situation and be able to describe any strategic course of action. Thirdly, we will apply the aforementioned theory to the current events and, based on it, we will decide if the Russian approach is rational or not. Fourthly, we will confront the Russian military strategic objectives with possible NATO military strategic objectives regarding Ukraine.

1. Strategic Outlook

After several decades of peace and apparently civil relations in Europe, the revival of the Russian Federation, the inheritor of the Soviet Union, brings with it a new security competition between the western block – now represented by an enlarged NATO – and itself, the Russian Federation.



Even though the vast majority of those commenting or analyzing the events in Ukraine consider that these are the fault of an expansionist Russia that starts wars because it does not like peace, we stand in the camp of those considering that the international relations is a game where states rarely do the things they like, most of the time doing things they think they have to do for their national survival. In this international relations school, called Offensive Realism, the engine of world events *is not greed, it is fear* (Mearsheimer 2001). Thus, in an environment where there are no authorities above state level, authorities that a state could turn to in case of an outside unmanageable security threat, the only means for survival is accruing as much power as possible.

Those fortuitous countries, blessed by geography or smart policies with sizable resources and populations, have the resources and instruments to convert this latent power into palpable power – military power. Those that have enough power, military principally, to theoretically make a run to becoming regional hegemony qualify for the title of *great powers*.

One of the first things a great power will do is build around itself a secure, or security area, an area from which it cannot be challenged by any other peer competitor. Based on the size and the capabilities of each such actor, and based on geography, their security areas will differ in dimensions. The best example in this regard is the USA. Having started as a mere string of thirteen colonies on the American shores of the Atlantic, the United States expanded westwards, dispossessed the native tribes of almost all lands that it now possesses, and took possession of the rest through purchases. Once the “*Manifest destiny*” (Merry 2010) borders had been established, the US declared as state policy the “*Monroe Doctrine*” (Monroe 1823) which it was held dear and implemented to this day, not accepting on the American continent troops from the outside.

With the coming to power of Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation, which had come close to becoming a failed state, started reorganizing itself internally. With this reorganization of the state, its instruments of national power started to function. For a long while, the main instrument was diplomacy, but diplomacy not backed by a noteworthy military, yielded moderate results. However, the Russian state did not stop in its efforts and, year after year, with a reborn economic growth, married to a better birth rate, helped in rebuilding the military instrument, as well.

With such newly gained capabilities, the Russians became more assertive in international politics. The most important event in this respect was the 2008 NATO Summit held in Bucharest. Even though Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, considered very dangerous to think about the expansion of NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia (Burchard 2022), the US President, George W. Bush, succeeded in advancing this point of view and to make it NATO policy, expressed in the Summit’s official communiqué. Certainly, the Russian President, Vladimir



Putin, who was invited at the Summit, made it very clear that this intended policy constituted a “red line”, representing a grave threat to Russian security (Dawar 2008). Even though his remarks were not taken seriously by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) titular members, the Russian Federation made its point, at least partially, when a few months later responded forcefully to the Georgian attempt to incorporate the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. After only five days of open conflict, Georgia realized it was better to leave things the way they were – Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent from Georgia, but maintain Georgia unharmed.

In order to prevent the perceived “western threat” from maturing before it was too late, the Russian Federation pursued a politically forceful course of action, by incorporating the Crimean Peninsula, which first declared its independence from Ukraine, then requested admission into the Russian Federation. Thus, among other advantages, the port of Sevastopol was preserved under Russian control. A second purpose of the Russian move was probably to deter further NATO expansion, demonstrating to the Alliance, yet again, that Ukraine was a “red line” not to be discounted any more.

NATO started providing to Ukraine solid support, materialized in a constant flow of armaments (BBC, Nato members ‘start arms deliveries to Ukraine’ 2014) and training provided to great numbers of Ukrainian soldiers (BBC 2014). The intent behind all this support was to make Ukraine strong enough to defeat Russia, in case of a new confrontation between the two in the future.

In the attempt to bring about a solution convenient to both itself and NATO, the Russian Federation started putting on Ukraine a different type of pressure. Thus, using the Russian-speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine as a political tool, Russia conducted diplomatic efforts that led to the signing of two accords – the Minsk Protocol (Poroshenko 2014) and the Minsk II Accord (BBC 2015). In both, Russia insisted on provisions that would transform Ukraine into a federal state. Thus, Ukraine would not be able to continue its pro-western demarches, something that proves above any doubts that the Russian desired end state was not a new Russian Empire that included Ukraine, but a Ukraine that was a bulwark in the face of western expansion.

Needless to develop the point that, despite Russia’s wishes and hopes in the Minsk agreements, the West used them, especially the Minsk II Accord, as tools destined to provide the time to forge the Ukrainian military into a force able to fight and defeat the Russians inside Ukraine, should another Crimea-like event arose (Midttun 2022).

Realizing the trend things were taking, on February 24th, 2022, the Russian forces started the invasion of Ukraine, in the now-famed “special military operation”. With the deep cause of conflict being the perceived “western encroachment” upon its security space, the Russian Federation set out to obtain, as desired end state, a Ukraine



that would never become a NATO member. Even though, in order to establish this end state, the Russian Federation has been using all available instruments of national power. In the following pages we will focus on the strategic military objectives that, once established, will contribute decisively to the desired end state.

2. The Culminating Point of Victory (CPV) – the Base of Analysis

An audit of the pronouncements of different analysts dissecting the conflict in Ukraine will have one believe that the Russian military is bent on conquering Ukraine in its entirety and transform it into a province, or greater oblast of the Federation.

Even though this supposed desire could seem in keeping with the precepts of Offensive Realism, the semblance resists only to a superficial look. And that is because any rational state actor will shirk from just “aggression” and lean strongly toward “calculated aggression”. While the term “aggression” means using all means necessary to solve a problem, regardless of the aftermath, calculated aggression tempers the attacker and forces him to consider the consequences. Thus, while a Russian Federation such as the one described by analysts will do everything in its power to conquer Ukraine, a rational Russia will pose itself questions like: “is conquering Ukraine (i.e. total victory) doable?”, in case the answer is “yes”, “what are the costs of doing it?” and, most importantly, “having paid these costs, where would the Russian Federation be situated in the international power system?” Because, in a ruthless international system, no rational power will ever want to collect *pyrrhic victories*.

And these are exactly the questions that shape the military part of planning such a war effort. Fortunately, military science has the right tool to help answer these questions – CPV (Clausewitz, On war 1976).

Developed by Carl von Clausewitz, CPV designates the point, during a war, where/when the initial power of the attacker has been consumed to a level where he has only enough strength to segue to defence and preserve the gains made to that point. By which time, the attacker will strategically find himself in two situations. The first situation is positive and has at its core an attacker that planned so finely as to have achieved his desired objectives and has achieved his intended end state by this point. The second situation presents a poor, or unfortunate, strategic planner, whose strategic objectives are still to be achieved. The latter planner has only two options. First, to take account of the situation and move to defence, as prescribed by von Clausewitz. Without reaching the desired end state, this actor could try to leverage the gains made to that point into obtaining a better peace than the one he proceeded to break. Secondly, he does not realize his dire strategic situation and continues the war effort on the offense, area where he is continuously becoming weaker, with defeat lurking behind every turn of events.



It is worth mentioning how the CPV comes about. In von Clausewitz's view, the attacker has an initial success, due to better preparation and surprise. The balance of power is further inclined in his advantage by factors like: the defender loses strategically important capabilities, and other international actors tend to side with the attacker who might already look like the victor. However, with the war continuing, the successful attacker starts to leave behind populations, some of which are not friendly. They can become a problem for the soft-skinned logistic lines that follow the fighting forces, and the problem can degenerate to the level where the offensive is stopped. Moreover, with an attacker's victory still in the future, unfriendly state actors will be tempted to step in and to provide support to the defender, fighting the attacker by proxy (one of the favourite strategies of the great powers in trying to increase their relative strength).

3. The Russian Military Strategic Objectives – Unlimited vs. Limited

The first decision to be taken by the Kremlin with regard to the war in Ukraine was the kind of victory, or the kind of objectives, to pursue – total victory, coupled to unlimited objectives, or a partial victory, associated with limited objectives.

A total victory would have required an enormous number of troops and other capabilities dedicated to the effort. Only to occupy the western half of Poland, a smaller, less populous country, Nazi Germany had allotted 1.5 million troops who, compared to the Polish forces, were enormously better trained and enjoyed state-of-the-art equipment. Poles apart, Ukraine was a 2.5 times larger country, more populated, defending with forces who had been trained and equipped by NATO, for at least the previous eight years.

Moreover, a total victory, at conventional level, would have meant a long period of time, fact that, besides from tying down great numbers of Russian troops, would have opened the door for other great powers to engage the Federation in a war-by-proxy with greater chances of success.

The mere number of troops sent into Ukraine – approximately 170,000, neither in the best shape nor outstandingly equipped, is the main indicator that the Russian Federation was seeking a quick campaign, with very limited objectives. While the desired end state was the same – prevent NATO's expansion into Ukraine, the military instrument seemed to be of secondary importance to the diplomatic one. The military operation seemed to be meant to force a negotiated resolution to the conflict, resolution that favoured Russia.

And the Russian plan was working. In April 2022, negotiations were already underway, which, without having reached a conclusion, seemed to be going in the desired direction – end of conflict and a neutral Ukraine. However, the mentioned negotiations were stopped at the express request of Boris Johnson, the then-UK Prime Minister (Orbán 2023).



With the negotiations-based course of action out of the question, the Russian Federation was left with only developing one course of action based on the military instrument, with strategic military objectives being left to bring about the desired end state.

However, even in this situation, for the Russian Federation, the war seemed to have remained limited. And to provide a justification for this statement, we will appeal again to Carl von Clausewitz. In his magisterial work, the Prussian advances *the trinity* (“primordial hatred”, embodied in the people – “the play of chance and probability”, embodied in the military commander – “subordination to policy”, embodied in the political decider) (Clausewitz 1976), as the triplet that decides the type of war to be waged. A war of limited objectives will be the result of less involvement from the people, and with great interaction between only the politicians and the military. They are able to give the war a rational course. The more the people are involved, the more passion comes into play and along with it, unlimited objectives (e.g. total destruction of the enemy). In our case, the decision by the Kremlin to maintain the label of “*special military operation*” and wage the war without conscription, hint at the strong decision of adhering to limited objectives, unlimited objectives spelling out the strategic doom of the endeavor. In an unlimited war, the Russian forces would have reached the CPV before achieving their objectives and establishing their desired end state.

With regards to the new military strategic objectives, they will have to be dictated mostly by the CPV, and in order to locate it as well as possible, one has to look at the ethnicity map of Ukraine (Wright 2022). Ethnically, we can speak of two different countries – Eastern Ukraine and Western Ukraine. Eastern Ukraine is populated in its majority by ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers. These Christian Orthodox people, who felt oppressed by Kiev to the point of starting a civil war trying to gain their independence, represent a natural ally for the Kremlin in this conflict. Thus, in their midst, the Russian invasion forces will move freely without worrying greatly about possible guerrilla actions in their rear. That is, once the conventional Ukrainian forces have been pushed out of these areas.

However, in Western Ukraine the situation is reversed, with the vast majority represented by a Catholic, ethnically Ukrainian majority, complete with Polish, Romanian and Hungarian minorities, neither one manifesting pro-Russian inclinations. Thus, an eventual thrust in Western Ukraine would certainly encounter the kind of problems Napoleon Bonaparte encountered during the occupation of the Iberian Peninsula and during the campaign against Russia.

In a nutshell, at the moment, the CPV is represented by the ethnic barrier because it is the line that, once crossed, has the potential of provoking strategic defeat to Russia. Thus, the military strategic objectives will have to answer two questions: “What is to be done with Eastern Ukraine?”, and “What is to be done with Western Ukraine?”



Taking into account all the analysis above, formulating an answer to the former question seems more facile. Given the fact that it is mostly inhabited by friendly people of Russian culture, population more facile to assimilate by the Federation, the Kremlin can settle for conquest and incorporation of these areas in the Federation. When this article was published, the Russian forces had occupied almost four of the eighth oblasts of Eastern Ukraine and their offensive rhythm seems to be on a crescendo. Once occupied, all four oblasts conducted referenda and requested incorporation in the Russian Federation, request promptly acceded to by the Kremlin. For the remaining four eastern oblasts, the course of action will most likely be similar, under the condition that the Russian forces will be able to defeat the Ukrainian military forces defending there, or force them to retreat westwards.

The situation becomes thornier when one has to answer the latter question – *what to do militarily with Western Ukraine?* Even losing Crimea and the eight eastern oblasts, Western Ukraine remains a sizable territory, populated with a large anti-Russian population. Having lost Eastern Ukraine, Western Ukraine would lean even more strongly towards integration in the western institutions, especially NATO, and would support any anti-Russian policy.

Unfortunately, given the fact that currently the Russian Federation can only use its military instrument, the answer is a push to transform Western Ukraine into a failed state. And it can do this by attempting to destroy whatever physical assets that could facilitate, if left untouched, the functioning of Western Ukraine and the survival of its military forces as a coherent instrument. At the time of writing, the Russian forces, without putting boots-on-the-ground in Western Ukraine, seem to be focusing on exactly this kind of course of action, using medium range missiles to destroy critical civilian infrastructure [e.g. the power grid in Western Ukraine (Fenbert and Hodunova 2024)] and critical military infrastructure [e.g. missile factory in Dniepro (Syngaivska 2024)], and threatening to use these same weapons to destroy “decision-making centers” in Kiev (Denisova and Independent 2024).

Treating Western Ukraine like this will have a double-fold effect. On the one hand, with an utterly destroyed infrastructure, and under constant Russian threat, Western Ukraine will have, atop of the economic problem, a compound demographic problem. Besides the falling birth rate before the war, currently, Ukraine registers large numbers of men lost to war (killed or gravely wounded in action), thus lost for the Ukrainian economy, and growing numbers of war refugees, whose prospects, and probably will, to return are shrinking with every passing day (Sauer 2024). Such a country will be at least difficult to be incorporated into NATO.

On the other hand, if the western countries insist on rebuilding Ukraine and make it a NATO member, they will be presented with a double-faceted problem. In the first place, the level of destruction in Western Ukraine is soaring with every Russian missile attack and so is the level of funds necessary to be invested by



the European countries in reconstruction. In the second place, with the European economies registering a steady decline, the prospect of rebuilding Ukraine to the level of re-making it functional is fast becoming unattainable. Not to mention that every major step in the direction of Ukrainian reconstruction will be easily reset by the Russian Federation with a new missile salvo.

4. The Viability of the Assessed Russian Military Strategic Objectives

The previous analysis was conducted from a Russian perspective, and we consider it correct. The assessed CPV is based on the demographic fracture between the pro- and anti-Russian populations in the pre-war Ukraine.

For a complete analysis, we have to ask ourselves “what are the chances that the determined CPV remains, thus making Russia’s partial victory with the current limited objectives attainable?” For an answer to this question we need to take a look at the probable course of action of the Ukraine-NATO tandem.

So far, the war between the two actors, the Russian Federation and Ukraine, has been one of attrition, a type of war imposed by the Russians, where what counts is not the square kilometers occupied, but the casualty exchange ratio, that is which of the two can cause the other more casualties for every casualty of its own. Up to this point, even this parameter seems to favour Russia greatly. The Federation has been able to keep the masses away and only use volunteers and mercenaries (e.g. the Wagner Group), while Ukraine has reached a point when even with forced conscription (Hockenos 2024) registers an average age of over 40 (Safronova, Choursina and Krasnolutska 2024).

With these dwindling numbers, only two drivers appear to be theoretically able to change the fortunes of this war – very advanced western weapons transferred to Ukraine and western forces on the ground, fighting alongside the Ukrainian forces. We will turn first to western weapons.

The western transfers of weapons, as mentioned before, started in 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea, and accelerated after February 2022. Thus, with the passage of time, capabilities of all sorts, from the individually-operated ones (e.g. Javelin anti-tank missile), to medium-range ballistic missiles (e.g. US-made ATACMS and UK-made Storm Shadow) and supersonic multi-role fighter aircraft (i.e. the US-made F-16), going through armoured vehicles (e.g. German-made Leopard and US-made Abrams tanks), have seen service in this conflict, on the Ukrainian side.

Even though these systems produced good tactical outcomes at the beginning, the Russians have so far found efficient countermeasures, staying with the attritionist approach. Thus, the very good air-defence and at least good air attack capabilities have allowed the Russian forces to establish air superiority whenever and wherever



it was needed. Moreover, every time a ground-based weapon system seemed able to locally tilt the balance in Ukrainians' favor, their opponent just took note of the fact, switched to defence and let the Ukrainians go on the offense, reducing thus their own losses and inflicting more losses on the enemy. So, notwithstanding the West's providing conventional weapons to Ukraine, the CPV has a great probability of remaining intact, along with the Russian strategic military objectives.

Currently, the vertical escalation has reached a point where, given full permission to use them in depth, Ukraine fired ATACMS and Storm Shadow missiles against Russia to no great effect, but Russia escalated with firing at Ukraine an experimental hypersonic ballistic missile – the Oreshnik, to a great effect (Rumble 2024). Furthermore, Vladimir Putin signed an update to the Russian nuclear doctrine, lowering the threshold and provisioning for a nuclear first strike against nuclear-armed states that contribute, even conventionally, to threatening the national integrity of the Russian Federation (Faulconbridge and Kolodyazhnyyand 2024).

Thus, we can conclude that the only support NATO countries could extend Ukraine in escalating vertically the conflict with the Russian Federation is, theoretically, the provision of nuclear weapons. But such a move will most likely push Russia to a nuclear first strike, at least against Western Ukraine. But this only in theory. In reality, the nuclear cloud from an explosion in Western Ukraine has a notable probability of travelling and affecting primarily, besides Western Ukraine, Western Russia and Belarus, and secondarily Poland, Finland, and maybe Hungary and Romania (Maps-on-the-Web 2019). Thus, a Russian nuclear first strike becomes less probable in Western Ukraine and becomes more probable against western targets farther away. From here, the vertical nuclear escalation is easy to follow an exponential upward trend and bring with it the almost complete annihilation of at least Europe, from Atlantic to the Urals, and of most of the continental US (Jacobsen 2024). Thus, this scenario – provide Ukraine weapon systems capable of escalating the conflict – is the less likely to be implemented, if the western leaders remain rational actors.

The second scenario is more dangerous and it features NATO countries putting boots-on-the-ground in Ukraine. This scenario has two sequels. According to the first one, NATO countries will be engaged in the effort to stop the Russian advance, even roll back the gains made so far by the Federation. Should the NATO countries engage in such an endeavour only for the end state of stopping the advance and create thus negotiation space for a political deal that leaves things in their current state – Russia withholds possession of Crimea and the four already annexed oblasts, and Ukraine becomes a neutral state – the analyzed conflict scenario has decent chances of remaining at conventional level. Even though nobody reaches their desired end state, the prospect of escalation in the nuclear realm would most likely convince the parties to at least freeze the conflict and try different approaches. The



CPV will likely move above what Russia can do with the current approach but, a different approach would only be nuclear, with the above described outcome. And the probability of Russia's using nuclear weapons offensively, knowing the end state – Armageddon, is extremely low. As already mentioned, the Russian Federation will try to alter the status quo through a different strategy.

The second sequel is the more problematic. According to this one, the NATO forces deployed in Ukraine have the mission of supporting the local forces in order to regain the territories Ukraine has lost so far, thus to force the CPV move backwards in time and hand Russia a catastrophic strategic defeat. While a NATO failure has chances of bringing the conflict to a frozen state, as described above, a NATO success places Vladimir Putin's Russia in front of a dilemma – accept having fought for three years, maybe more by that time, and lost, an option with grave repercussions, at least for the current Russian regime, or resort to escalation in the nuclear realm, in defence of the Russian borders (in accordance with the Russian understanding of those borders at this point in time), as provisioned for by the latest update to the Russian nuclear doctrine (ICAN 2024). Even if the probability of Russia choosing a nuclear first strike is reduced, given the possible outcome to which that probability is applied, the rational western leaders would still probably shirk from this type of escalation, as well. Thus, rationally speaking, even in this sub-scenario the CPV and the military strategic objectives it determines seem to remain unchallenged.

Conclusions

However painful, an analysis of the Russian Federation's military strategic objectives in Ukraine has to admit the fact that the attacker had been acting very rationally, most of the time.

Thus, instead of desiring, from the beginning of the conflict, to make Ukraine a part of the Federation, this article proves that the Kremlin would have preferred Ukraine to remain in the original borders, but a neutral actor, with no connection to NATO. To force all involved actors accept this idea, the Federation even started the military operation with only enough forces necessary to make everyone understand that it was very serious and the normal path of Ukraine becoming an ally was no longer feasible.

When the Ukrainian powerful resistance made it clear that no Russian desire would be taken seriously, the forces of the Federation started to be reshaped so they would become the main actor, not the supporting one, in achieving the political objectives. Thus, the Kremlin started deploying in Ukraine more forces, and the serious capabilities that would allow them to fight with great advantages, land- and air-based.

However, even when the deployed Russian forces started to be the main actor, its desired end state remained the same – Ukraine is not a NATO member.



In order to make this happen, the Federation has been using its military forces to achieve its military strategic objectives – conquer and bring inside the Russian borders the Russian-speaking, Orthodox, Eastern Ukraine, and transform the Ukrainian-speaking, Catholic, Western Ukraine into an actor that would be impossible to become a NATO member.

At this point in time, the Russian strategy seems to be functioning and Ukraine does not seem to be able to find a better one. So far, the attrition strategy applied by a great power does not appear to be somehow defeated by any maneuverist approach applied by a smaller country, not even one prepared by NATO itself. What is more, not even NATO's involvement so far seems to be able to move the CPV of the Russian operations in a direction capable, not to defeat Russia, but to bring it to more balanced negotiations.

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LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS, PROPAGANDA AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

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The present paper is a non-systematic narrative review of security challenges and solutions related to the LLM-generated propaganda, considered in the context of influence activities. The purpose of the paper is to provide a synthesis of the knowledge on the mentioned topic, based on research, opinion and regulatory documents published between 2017 and 2024. To that end, the developed research protocol is designed to take into account criteria related to the diversity, credibility and eligibility of primary and secondary sources. The synthesis of topic-related knowledge is then illustrated and discussed in a manner as objective as possible. Thus, we consider that the main findings can be of help for researchers to identify, justify and refine hypotheses, focusing on possible pitfalls and gaps, as well as for the general public to acquire a higher level of situational awareness, given the novelty of the topic. Moreover, they may contribute towards targeting new avenues for research in the field.

Keywords: *generative AI; large language models (LLMs); propaganda; influence activities; AI-related security challenges.*

Introduction¹

Large Language Models (LLMs) are algorithms that, based on very large data sets or big data, recognize, summarize, translate, predict, and generate content.

¹ A.N.: A synthesis of this research was presented at the International Conference *Societal and Technological Determinants of Security: Adaptive Strategies for Information and Cyber Challenges*, organised on 24 May 2024 by War Studies University, Poland, and İzmir Kâtip Çelebi University, Turkey (online participation).

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They represent a class of deep learning architectures that are called transformer networks, the transformer model referring to a neural network that learns context and meaning by tracking relationships in sequential data, which can be the words that form a sentence. Following the model of natural language, a transformer is made up of multiple transformer blocks, also known as layers, thus being able to decipher input and predict output, in relation to feed-back and normalization processes (Nvidia, 2024).

Transformer architecture was first discussed by Google in 2017, when eight researchers published a study focusing on attention mechanisms and expanding them into machine deep learning processes. In the 7-year period since its release to the public, the study, dubbed *Attention Is All You Need*, has been cited for over 100,000 times, being considered the modern artificial intelligence founding document. The researchers present the Transformer as the first model completely based on attention, replacing the recurrent layers most frequently used “in encoder-decoder architectures with multi-headed self-attention”, being thus faster and more effective than other architectures based on recurrent or convolutional layers (Vaswani & al, 2017, p. 9).

Considering the complexity of human communication science, the introduction of another actor, which is non-human, although it is trained by humans, has complicated the already inter- and trans-disciplinary research paradigm, providing the focus on competition for information and attention with a completely new perspective. The possibility of automated content creation has also resulted in reconsidering influence activities, generating extensive discussions on the recently introduced vulnerabilities, as well as on the necessity of adopting new rules and regulations in the field.

Against this backdrop, the present paper, employing empirical and qualitative research methods, is intended to be a non-systematic narrative review of the identified security challenges and solutions related to the LLM-generated propaganda. Propaganda is considered in the context of influence activities intended to alter beliefs, generate social polarization, change views and voting behaviour or inspire political and other types of violence.

Thus, the purpose of the article is to provide a synthesis of the knowledge on the mentioned topic, based on the research, opinion papers and regulatory documents published between 2017 and 2024. We consider it valuable for the following reasons. Firstly, the topic is a relatively novel one and a synthesis of the main findings can help the general public to acquire a higher level of situational awareness. Secondly, a literature review can help academia to find new directions of research, refine hypotheses, and identify possible drawbacks and gaps in the literature. Thirdly, it could help decision-makers to consider broader and interconnected perspectives in order to adopt well-documented and responsible measures. Having in view the objectivity criteria, we have developed a research protocol intended to mitigate the risk of bias, which is detailed as follows.



Methods

The preliminary search of the literature has helped us to refine the topic and objective, as well as to establish the most appropriate research protocol, having considered the need for structuring the information presentation to meet criteria related not only to content diversity, objectivity and credibility, but also to editorial requirements. Thus, the protocol has been focused on finding the sources of information, setting the specific parameters for the literature search, as well as on establishing the selection criteria, namely the inclusion, exclusion and compilation ones.

With regard to the sources of information and the specific parameters for the eligible literature, we have searched the internet using keywords such as LLMs, challenge, security, propaganda, influence activities, regulation. In this way, we have created a bibliography list to be studied, focusing on the review topic, objectives and possible future developments.

Considering the great number of results, we have established some selection criteria, as follows. In terms of the period covered by the research, we have decided it to be that between 2017 and May 2024. The beginning of the period coincides with the publication of the study *Attention Is All You Need* (Vaswani & al, 2017) considered, as it has been previously shown, the modern artificial intelligence founding document. Thus, the research does not cover the already-documented studies related to the 2016 US elections.

Regarding the perspective diversity in relation to guarding against bias and credibility, we have selected information provided by LLM developers, academia, think tanks and international organizations such as the EU, focusing on the models present and prospective performance, the identified challenges and the already in force regulatory framework in the field. Thus, following the identification of pertinent information and its coding, considering the amount of data, we have applied further selection criteria, mainly intended to restrict the area of research to the most relevant examples, to streamline redundant information, and to provide an as objective as possible synthesis, readable by both experts and general public, as we consider the topic should be of interest for everyone who wants to make responsible decisions in an age increasingly and profoundly affected by the AI flying progress.

Discussion

Considering the relative novelty of the topic and the varied degree of the audience familiarity with it, as well as the fact that there is still limited consensus on the definition of propaganda (Lică, 2024) in the context of its global dynamics, we have provided a synthesis of the most relevant identified information, developed in compliance with the described research protocol. Thus, the LLMs functioning principle and their potential to generate propaganda, seen in the context of influence activities, are explained. The major areas of concern in relation to security, be



they challenges, vulnerabilities or even threats, are revealed and discussed. The potential solutions to the identified issues are then presented, showing that they can be provided by means of the same mechanisms that generate the problem, by regulatory frameworks, or by an intelligently-agreed mix of them. As for already existing regulatory frameworks in the field, the EU example is provided. All the above-mentioned aspects are accompanied by the authors' logical interpretation, taking into account limitations related to comprehensiveness, systematization, and possible biases of the present narrative review.

1. LLMs and the Potential to Generate Propaganda

LLMs are systems that employ deep learning techniques, based on very large data sets or big data, to generate content, following the model of natural language processing (NLP). Although studied since the '60s, they became more prominent in 2017, when the neural networks called transformers were developed, allowing for their great efficiency and effectiveness and thus for their applicability in many domains. In 2021, the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HAI) coined the term *foundation models*, referring to models trained on broad data, which can be adapted to a wide range of tasks, being thus the subject of a paradigm shift. They are homogenization intensifiers, based on consolidation. However, consolidation is considered a double-edged sword, as it can reduce bias and improve robustness, on the one hand, and it identifies these models as singular points of failure that can radiate harms such as security risks and inequities to countless downstream applications, on the other hand (Bommasani & Liang, 2021). The foundation models need, therefore, to be trained on a large volume of data. Moreover, as they follow NLP, we can understand that these models, LLMs included, are both pre-trained and trained in use, by means of feedback. Since 2017, many such models have been developed, the most popular ones being ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, and Gemini, developed by Google, some of them being free to use.

It is thus evident, considering the ability of such models to create content, that there is the possibility for the particular content to be harmful. However, within the context of this paper, we will focus on the propaganda-related harm, propaganda being used here in the context of influence activities, as communication intended to further someone's malicious agenda, by determining the message receiver to choose a certain response that advantages the sender. It is also known as reflexive control. In NATO terms, propaganda refers to "information, ideas, doctrines, or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes, or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly" (NATO, 2020, p. 258), while the hostile content is that "produced by an adversarial actor, either openly or covertly, with the express purpose of countering NATO's message



and mission” (NATO, 2020, p. 152), disinformation and propaganda, as well as media trolls and bots being provided as examples. The main issues related to LLM-generated propaganda consist in the fact that they are targeted to the receiver, based on the analysis of existing data related to the receiver’s habits and preferences, on the one hand, and in the speed at which the message is propagated and even amplified, on the other hand.

In this context, the inherent mechanisms involved in LLM-generated content should be also considered as potential risk factors in relation to disinformation and propaganda, namely *pre-training*, *fine-tuning* and *reinforcement learning* from human feedback (RLHF) and reinforcement learning from AI feedback (RLAIF). As far as *pre-training* is concerned, mention should be made that models can be tricked, then propagating the trick. Moreover, LLMs learn to predict the next word by recognizing patterns in enormous quantities of text data, a process called *self-supervised pre-training*. In addition, the process also entails *representation* and *transfer learning*, referring to the situation in which a model trained for one task seems to be able to *transfer* what it has learned to a different task, based on a useful *representation* of text from its training data. Thus, such a pre-trained model will produce text that mirrors the internet text it has been trained on, which can be malicious in itself, such as hate speech, dangerous information etc., a problem that AI developers have to solve (Burtell & Tonner, 2024).

With regard to *fine-tuning*, it is one of the solutions provided by developers to limit the production of harmful outputs, either by mimicking malicious characteristics of data or by producing plausible yet false outputs. Thus, *fine-tuning* refers to methods of refining pre-trained models to meet particular purposes, entailing tasks or instructions, while *reinforcement learning* is an approach focused on training models to maximize a chosen measure of task performance, referred to as a *reward model*, namely an indicator of how effective the LLMs performance is to meet the task requirements. To do this, LLM developers collect data specifically for training their reward models, using RLHF, which entails human annotators to compare, rank and choose different responses, thus incorporating bias, or RLAIF, which resembles RLHF, the difference being that the LLM itself is provided with written instructions on how to rate outputs. In this context, it is hope that, in the future, LLMs may be able to evaluate each other on complex tasks that exceed the human capacity of unbiased or complete and complex evaluation. However, these techniques provide no guarantees of model behaviour, especially in untested situations, not being based on principled situations. In addition, they can be circumvented by malicious actors, seeking to either “trick” models into providing harmful responses or “undo” the initial fine-tuning, especially considering that LLMs developers, although they have some tools to control the output, such as filters, in order to meet specifications, are not flawless and unbeatable (Woodside & Toner, 2024).



To the above-mentioned aspects related to inherent LLMs issues, the one of LLMs hallucinations can be added. It is a phenomenon in which a “LLM, chatbot or computer vision tool perceives patterns or objects that do not exist or that are imperceptible by people, creating outputs that are nonsensical or altogether inaccurate” (IBM, 2024). It can occur as AI algorithms sometimes “produce outputs that are not based on training data, are incorrectly decoded by the transformer or do not follow any identifiable pattern”, because of training data inaccuracy or bias and high model complexity (IBM, 2024). In legal context, hallucinations of models are incriminated in up to 75% of the cases (Dahl, 2024). As for the relationship between LLMs hallucinations and propaganda, the inaccurate, false or disconnected content, generated, even unintentionally, because of the internal vulnerabilities of the model, may be employed, following its multiplication, in pursuing discriminatory, polarized or violent agendas, considering the possibility of altering the decision-making process. In this context, there can be unforeseen and undesirable consequences of using AI tools, which acquire more importance, considering especially the open-source technology, case in which preventing such issues has become increasingly challenging. Although developers claim to have addressed and resolved most of the identified hallucination-related issues, it is obvious that there may be others not yet identified, emerging, or, in the context of the present paper, intentionally invoked by malicious users, which raises the question of accountability.

Another largely debated topic-related issue is that of LLMs already existing or possible to exist autonomy. Although the number of experts who claim that AI autonomy belongs to a distant future, the prospect should be carefully considered, as the line between promise and peril could be extremely thin and blurred. On the other hand, it is natural for developers to want more and, according to available data, OpenAI, Microsoft and Google autonomy-related research is advanced. Therefore, it can be said that LLMs are beginning to control physical systems and make decisions in the real world, a promising and rapidly coming into production direction in the future being that of building LLM agents, namely models that can autonomously carry out complex tasks. In the context of the research conducted to grant the LLMs direct control of virtual and physical systems, there have already been available some simple mechanisms among which the following can be mentioned: OpenAI’s advanced data analyst tool that does not require the users to run the code themselves; LLMs equipped with web browsing capabilities that allow them to access websites and report back to the user; Google’s PALM-E can take instructions as input and produce commands to control physical robots; ChatGPT, based on manually written code, can control drones with plain language descriptions; ChemCrow connects a LLM with an external scientific tool to issue control commands to robotic synthesis machines; LLMs agents have been successful in playing Minecraft; AI agents can schedule calendar, invites and browse the internet; AutoGPT is a scaffolding (related



to code built up around a LLM that allows it to use tools) software able to convert a LLM into an agent moving around the web (Woodside & Toner, 2024). Under these circumstances, new issues related to governance, accountability and ethics arise. They have been summarized as follows: LLM attack surface allow them to be exploited by malicious agents, liability in case of malfunctions that cause harm, disclosure of both agent and user, ability of AI agents/models to prevent risks generated by other AI systems, restrictions, regulations to mitigate the risks of out-of-control and power-seeking agents, which should be considered by developers, users and policymakers altogether (Woodside & Toner, 2024). In this context, mention should be made that now multi-agent systems (MAS) are considered, meaning teams of LLMs that can interact, without the need for a human to continually direct them, in order to solve complex tasks.

2. LLM-Related Challenges and Possible Solutions. Documented Cases

Having exposed the main general mechanisms through which LLMs can generate propaganda, either by being employed by malicious users or by their inherent functions and vulnerabilities, we consider appropriate to discuss some particular aspects related to the challenges they pose, especially to security in relation to propaganda, as they have been documented in the literature.

With regard to the LLM-generated propaganda persuasion capability, in the context of the growing concern, voiced by policymakers, technologists, and researchers, that the new AI tools could supercharge covert propaganda campaigns by allowing propagandists to mass produce text at low cost, in 2023, Stanford HAI conducted a survey experiment on 8,221 US respondents comparing the persuasiveness of English-language foreign covert propaganda articles sourced from real-world campaigns to text generated by a large language model. The topics were related to drones, Iran, the US–Mexico border wall, and the conflict in Syria. It was found that LLMs could create highly persuasive text, and that a person fluent in English could improve the persuasiveness of AI-generated propaganda with minimal effort. In figures, GPT-3-generated propaganda was highly persuasive, 43.5% of respondents agreeing with the thesis statement, compared to 24.4% in the control group, while the articles generated by GPT-3 with an edited prompt were as persuasive as the original propaganda (46.4% compared to 47.4%). Moreover, if a propagandist edited the input and selected the best of the three outputs on each topic, the GPT-3-generated propaganda would be even more persuasive than the original propaganda (52.7% compared to 47.4%) (Goldstein, 2024, p. 34). Considering the emerging GPT-4 as well as the visual and audio content (deepfake), it is obvious that propaganda can become increasingly effective.



In the context of the possibility to use LLMs to generate content that, as we have shown, proves to be credible, experts have debated the impact these tools can have on different fields of activity, especially following the launching of ChatGPT in November 2022. As far as journalism is concerned, three experts and two startup founders were thus invited by Reuters to express their ideas on the topic. The impact of AI becomes obvious even from the beginning, with reference to the interviewees' jobs, namely computational journalist, AI editor, Head of JournalismAI, a project by the London School of Economics journalism think tank Polis, as well as to the fact that the mentioned startup is an app that offers readers daily AI-generated brief summaries. Moreover, we find that there are many news publishers automating some content, including global agencies like Reuters, AFP and AP. In addition to automation, the development of LLMs offers new applications to journalism, journalists themselves testing the capabilities of chatbots to write and edit, feeling that there is an intelligence involved, even if it is still just a type of predictive technology, it is not original, and it does not have the required analytic capability, according to declarations (Adami, 2023). In this way and beyond the scope of the present paper, the LLM-generated content impact on other fields of activity, such as education and research can be analysed, again raising questions related to authorship and intellectual property.

To continue with the challenges to security that may be posed by LLMs, used as tools to generate automatically convincing and misleading text, besides the fact that AI tools can help malicious actors to spread disinformation and scale their operations, the phenomenon leads to legitimately questioning the percentage of truth in the content that is consumed online, as well the ways in which authenticity can be determined. Thus, in a report that was released to the public in early 2024, NewsGuard internet trust organization has identified as much as 725 unreliable websites publishing AI-generated news and information, which may be overseen by human agents or not, meaning that, in the absence of editorial control, the news and information did not meet journalistic standards (News Guard, 2024). Also, in early 2024, Google has advanced an experimental AI tool to be used by a selected group of independent publishers in the United States of America. Within this experiment, the beneficiaries had to publish daily three articles generated by AI, which leads to the conclusion that "traditional lines that enable trust in online content can be easily blurred" (Karanasios & Risius, 2024). The study conducted by two Queensland Professors emphasizes the fact that digital products, as they become essential on a large scale both for businesses and also in everyday life, "serve as a tool for platforms, AI companies and big tech to anticipate and push back against government", a possible explanation for the fact that the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risk Report predicts misinformation and disinformation to be the greatest threats for 2025-2026 (Karanasios & Risius, 2024).



On the other hand, to be as compliant as possible with the objectivity standard, mention should be made that LLM-generated propaganda is employed not only by malicious agents, which can be individuals or non-state actors, but also by state actors. In this context, a Freedom House report published in October 2023 in MIT Review shows that AI-generated texts are also used by governments and political actors around the world, in both democracies and autocracies, to manipulate public opinion in their favour and to automatically censor critical online content. Thus, researchers documented the use of generative AI in 16 countries to influence public debate. Moreover, it was found that, in 2023, global internet freedom declined for the 13th consecutive year, driven in part by the proliferation of artificial intelligence. In this context, some examples are provided, such as those of Venezuela, where pro-government messages were spread through AI-generated content. In addition, the report shows that a combination of human and bot campaigns was used to manipulate online discussions, at least 47 governments having deployed commentators to spread propaganda in 2023, which was double the number a decade ago. The cited report also discusses the normalization of the AI-generated content, which can make people more sceptical to true information, especially in times of crises and political conflict. Freedom House researchers documented 22 countries that passed laws requiring or incentivizing internet platforms to use machine learning to remove unfavourable online speech, China and India being examples in this case. In all, a record high of 41 governments blocked websites for political, social, and religious speech during the year covered by the study (Ryan-Mosley, 2023).

In the same vein, a research work conducted in 2023 by the University of Washington, Carnegie Mellon University and Xi'an Jiaotong University, presented at the Association for Computational Linguistics conference, consisting of testing 14 large language models on political biases, found that OpenAI's ChatGPT and GPT-4 were the most left-wing libertarian, while Meta's Llama was the most right-wing authoritarian. Feminism and democracy were among the addressed topics, models being retrained to detect hate speech and misinformation, potentially causing real harm. Some of the provided examples refer to some models refusing to offer information about abortion and contraception, expressing support for taxing certain social categories, such as the rich, overemphasizing social conservatism and hate speech targeting ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. It is thus obvious that such messages can result in more, even extreme, social and political polarization, with harmful or uncontrollable consequences. Another interesting aspect emphasized by the mentioned research is that the process of training data helped to reinforce models biases even further. Considering to remove biased content from data sets in order to mitigate biases in language models, researchers have come to the conclusion that it is not enough, on the one hand, and that it is very hard to clean a vast database of biases, on the other hand. In other words, no language model can be entirely free from political biases (Heikkila, 2023).



Having presented some of the mechanisms of generating propaganda through the use of LLMs as well as some documented proofs of its existence, we will further review certain proposed solutions to counter the phenomenon that may have consequences for security, be they AI-aided or regulatory ones, besides education and critical thinking abilities enhancement (Lupu, 2023).

In relation to the models inherent vulnerabilities, some of the proposed solutions include the strict input validation and sanitization, meaning filtering out malicious or unexpected prompts that could initiate unauthorized request; security audits and configuration reviews to confirm that internal resources remain shielded from the LLM; network segmentation to isolate the LLMs from sensitive internal resources; monitoring and alerting in the event of unusual or unauthorized activities; least privilege access, both in terms of data and access; ethical guidelines and usage policies for the model, the main ethical concerns in the context of the present paper being those related to bias propagation and misinformation spread (Bright; Protect AI, 2023). All these aspects become much more important considering the results of a survey conducted among developers in May 2023. 70% of all respondents in the USA, Germany, India, UK and Northern Ireland were using or planning to use AI tools in their development process that year and those learning to code from online resources increased from 70% to 80% since the 2022 survey (Stack Overflow, 2023).

In the same vein, another proposed solution is that of providing LLMs with the ability to detect propagandistic textual spans, which is related to the above-presented annotation and reinforcement tools, be they RLHF or RLAIF. As RLHF is found costly and even faulty, RLAIF is taken into consideration in relation to its ability to optimize the content and mitigate propaganda-associated risks. We illustrate this proposed solution with a study that has explored the ability of ChatGPT-3 and GPT-4, compared to human annotators, to detect and label spans with propagandistic techniques, such as loaded language, revealing the GPT-4 great performance potential in all the three assigned roles, namely annotator, selector and consolidator, the highest score being in the case of consolidator, meaning that GPT-4 is learning from the initial annotations to perform better, closer to expert consolidators' level (Hasanain & Ahmad, 2024).

As for the rules and regulations in the field, we will discuss those adopted at the European Union level.

3. EU Regulatory Framework in the Field

Acknowledging that the Artificial Intelligence (AI) will have an enormous impact on the way people live and work, the European Union (EU) has developed some regulatory documents meant not only to achieve the goal of becoming a global hub in AI, but also to set out clear transparency and reporting obligations for any



company placing an AI system on the EU market as well as for companies whose system outputs are used within the EU.

Thus, in 2018, the Commission and Member States established a Coordinated Plan, namely a strategy in the field, which was reviewed in 2021. The key actions mentioned in the new strategy focus on setting enabling circumstances for development of AI and uptake within the EU, making it an environment in which excellent quality is found from the laboratory up to the market, and guaranteeing that AI “works for people and is a force for good in society” (European Commission, 2021). Moreover, the Digital Europe and Horizon Europe programs were planned.

The mentioned Coordinated Plan goes hand in hand with the Proposal for a Regulation on Artificial Intelligence. Referring to this important act, as it is the first worldwide legislation of such complexity regarding AI, the Commission released its proposal in April 2021, setting out a risk-based approach to regulation designed to grow trust in technology and ensure the safety and fundamental rights of both people and businesses. The proposal establishes a differentiated regulatory structure, prohibiting some uses of AI while setting severe norms for high-risk usage and lighter regulations for AI systems that do not pose such great risks.

According to the EU internal decision-making process, in June 2023, the Artificial Intelligence Act was amended (European Parliament, 2023), and was adopted in March 2024 by the Parliament, and on 21 May by the Council, being fully implementable two years after entry into force. Some parts of the Act will be applied sooner, like the interdiction of AI systems that pose unacceptable risks, codes of practice, and rules on general-purpose AI systems. Obligations for high-risk systems are applicable 36 months after its entry into force. Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, is not considered as having high-risk. However, it will have to obey the transparency conditions and EU copyright law by revealing that the content is AI-aided, preventing the model from producing illegal content, and publishing information relating to copyrighted data used for training. Moreover, high-impact general-purpose AI models that would be able to produce systemic risk, such as the more innovative AI model GPT-4, would have to undertake systematic assessments and any severe incidents will need to be conveyed to the European Commission. In addition, any content either created or altered with the help of AI – images, audio or video files (as, for instance, deepfakes) – will have to be clearly identified as AI generated, so that users can be conscious that they are exposed to such material.

In the same vein, the Artificial Intelligence Act addresses not only the issue of AI systems classification, but also the use of general-purpose AI (GPAI) models. As for the new governance architecture, several bodies are set up (AI Office, AI Board, advisory forum for stakeholders, etc.) and penalties are established. Transparency, safeguarding fundamental rights and measures in favour of innovation are also considered. The main takeaways can be briefly summarized as follows: the Act bans



AI systems involved in cognitive behavioural manipulation and social scoring within the EU; it prohibits AI usage for predictive policing based on profiling and systems that make use of biometric data to categorize people according to race, religion, or sexual orientation; for GPAI, the Act requires compliance with transparency requirements, exempting from these regulations the systems used exclusively for military, defence, and research purposes (Council of the EU, 2024).

Another document to be mentioned is the one developed by the European Parliamentary Research Service, entitled Generative AI and watermarking, to explain main generative AI functioning mechanisms and related concerns. Among them, the following are mentioned: unauthorized exploitation of datasets, openness to misuse, potentially leading to plagiarism, privacy issues, and AI hallucination phenomena. The document emphasizes that the need to differentiate AI-generated synthetic content from human content has become a key policy issue, showing that people are increasingly unable to detect AI-generated content. In this context, the document shows that a range of approaches are being tested to trace how AI content is generated and to document its provenance, which include content labelling, the use of automated fact-checking tools, forensic analysis, meaning the content examination for inconsistencies or anomalies that indicate manipulation, and watermarking techniques, which create a unique identifiable signature that is invisible to humans but algorithmically detectable and that can be traced back to the AI model, thus enabling the detection of AI-generated content and the identification of its provenance. Although watermarking still have its limitations and drawbacks, it would be an important step forward in coexisting with AI in a decent and ethical manner (European Parliamentary Research Service/EPRS, 2023).

Conclusions

Artificial Intelligence has become increasingly important for society, economy, as well as policy-making. The transformer architecture, developed in 2017, enables AI to be brought into the mainstream, thus having the potential of a general-purpose technology, namely one characterised by pervasiveness, improvement and innovation. Moreover, it suggests helping to lead to possible new discoveries in different fields, to reduce the cost of goods and services, to make work more efficient and effective, which can have huge societal implications. However, at least for the moment, it has demonstrated some limitations, especially with regard to generative AI, with emphasis on LLMs, which allow users to input a variety of prompts to generate new content, such as text, images, videos, sounds, codes, 3D designs, and other media, based on their training to predict outcomes.

Having explained the LLMs functioning principle and their potential to generate biased content or propaganda, thus posing challenges to security, as well and having



identified the main intrinsic and extrinsic vulnerabilities and the proposed solutions to mitigate risks, we would like to add some closing remarks, mainly focused on the possible best ways for the humans and such tools coexistence, as, once they emerge, they should be integrated in our daily lives. Firstly, we consider that, in the context in which they represent a social technological challenge, they should remain only tools that can augment human intelligence and not replace it. Secondly, it is the issue of trust in these tools that should be thoroughly addressed, in relation to their fairness, explicability, transparency, robustness and privacy. Thirdly, as the results they provide can include a false narrative, either directly, by the technologically inherent vulnerabilities, or indirectly, as a result of their poisoning or hijacking by malicious actors, the cost of indiscriminately employing such tools in the decision-making process should be carefully considered. That is why we strongly support the idea of education, audit and accountability in working with such AI tools as LLMs, hoping that more people will be sincerely involved in sharing their experience in the field, taking into account that generative AI has become an extremely important societal challenge.

As for the way in which the EU AI Act addresses some of the concerns presented in the paper, it is intended to cover issues related not only to technology but especially to the potential risks that may have serious consequences for the citizens, including propaganda-related ones. Thus, the regulation bans the use of AI-aided techniques to influence behaviour, exploit individual's and group's vulnerabilities or socially score people, stipulating, in Annex III, the high-risk AI systems in areas such as biometrics, critical infrastructure, education and vocational training, employment, access to essential public services and benefits, law enforcement, migration, asylum and border control management, administration of justice and democratic processes. Moreover, in relation to both AI systems and GPAI models, the Act requires compliance with transparency standards. However, some areas are mentioned as exceptions. Among them, we consider relevant to the topic of the paper the AI systems and models developed and used exclusively for military, defence and national security purposes, as well as those that are intended for scientific research and development.

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THE POWER AND AUTONOMY OF A SMALL STATE: A REVIEW



Adrian-Eugen PREDĂ, Hegemony and national elites: Romania and the Great Powers during the 20th Century (Hegemonie și elite naționale: România și marile puteri în secolul XX), Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024, 378 pages¹.

A deep-held Romanian tradition states that the nation's fate is determined by its relationship with the great powers of the day. In recent decades, as the study of International Relations has developed as an autonomous field, a different idea has emerged, namely that small powers are more important than previously thought (A. Miroiu 2005). Between these interpretations, Adrian-Eugen Preda's work argues that the relationship is flexible,

contextual and involves two sides, from the hegemon to the smaller actor and vice versa. I recommend the book to any reader interested in world politics, Eastern Europe, Romania's history or even current affairs².

The author draws on the International Relations (IR) literature, which he expands by using economic institutionalism. The inclusive political institutions are about pluralism, equality of chance and strong states (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015, 94-98) and they lead to similar economic institutions, which comprise property rights, impartial justice, honest administration, and so on (Ibidem, 88-91). The main method is the longitudinal, historic case-study, a methodological trend which retained its importance in the last decades. For Adrian-Eugen Preda, there are two main partners, the hegemon and local elites, whose reciprocal relationship forms the central focus of the book.

¹ Image source: <http://www.editura.ubbcluj.ro/bd/ebooks/pdf/4295.pdf>

² To state my bias, the author is a personal friend of mine, and I am mentioned in the acknowledgements section. He also suggested the terms loose and tight hegemony as translations for the Romanian equivalents.



The first influence is top-down and it depends on the form of rule. Following the Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's thesis on the influence of inclusive and extractive institutions, Adrian-Eugen Preda distinguishes between tight and loose hegemony (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015)³. The former is the classical interventionist model, where the dominant power controls both the foreign and the domestic politics and structures of the minor power, relying more on force and coercion. The latter is based on influence and ideas, and focuses more on foreign affairs (Preda 2024, 31-69).

The flexibility of this relationship is highlighted in the analysis of Romania's past. Out of the five case-studies, the German hegemony during the occupation in World War I (WWI), the one during most of World War II (WWII), and during the Soviet occupation was tight (Preda 2024, 166-167, 285-287). There are commonalities between them, but only the communist regime directly changed Romanian's political elite, while the others found segments of the ruling class willing to collaborate (Ibidem, 285-287). Adrian-Eugen Preda points out that, even in this case, starting from the 1960s, there was a growing tendency of autonomy (Ibidem).

The lax hegemony is less rigid by definition. The author takes into account the French hegemony during the interwar era of the 20th century and the post-Cold War bilateral enlargement and policies of NATO and the EU (Preda 2024, 205-206, 314-325). They relied more on diplomacy and ideology, even if force was not absent, as a guarantee. An extra in this study is that the condominium between Berlin and Vienna in the late 19th century and early 20th century also falls into this category (Ibidem, 121-139).

The second influence is the one that flows from the small power to the hegemon. Adrian-Eugen Preda reviews the theories of alliances from the International Relations literature, focusing mostly on the dichotomy between balancing and bandwagoning (Preda 2024, 87-105). In this context, it is about either allying against a threatening power or joining it, and other possibilities are also mentioned (pass the buck, transcend, evade) (Ibidem). The author discovers that, between 1913 and 2000, the Romanian elites more frequently bandwagoned (Ibidem, 327-339).

Let us look at the most controversial case. Before WWI, Romania was part of the Triple Alliance, alongside Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy. When the war began in 1914, Bucharest proclaimed its neutrality and negotiated with both sides. In 1916, the new king, Ferdinand I, along with Prime-Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu and the majority of the political elite, decided to join the Entente. After two costly military campaigns and a controversial peace, the state rejoined the combat at the end of 1918 and gained a significant increase in both population and territory (Preda 2024, 119-168).

³ Inclusive political institutions are about pluralism, equality of chance and strong states (Acemoglu și Robinson 2015, 94-98). They lead to inclusive economic institutions, which include property rights, impartial justice, honest administration, and so on (Ibidem, 88-91). According to the literature, it is doubtful that Romania was inclusive from an institutional point of view before it started the process of Euro-Atlantic integration (Murgescu 2010, Miroiu 2016). There were tendencies, but with many limitations and failures, and some problems still persist. This restricts the author's ability to test part of his thesis.



The literature is divided on this point, and the author offers a specific interpretation, based on his theory. Adrian-Eugen Preda considers that these decisions reflect a form of bandwagoning, motivated by territorial goals and the expectation of Entente's victory (Preda 2024, 157-159). For him, the initial position of neutrality is a manifestation of elite's autonomy, and reflects a growing departure from the Triple Alliance. The decision to enter the war in 1916 was a culmination of a longer process of political realignment, in which national ideals played a significant role, alongside negotiations and pressures from both sides (Ibidem, 165-166).

Another interesting case is the interwar period. At the end of World War I, France had the strongest active ground force and the author considers it the hegemon, at least in terms of its relationship with Romania. Towards the end of 1930s, both Nazi Germany and Soviet Union pushed an assertive revisionist agenda. After Paris's capitulation and the territorial demands that followed, Bucharest entered the political, and especially military sphere of control of Berlin (Preda 2024, 169-240).

The author states that Romania went from a junior partner in a lax hegemony to a satellite in a tight domination. Paris relied on a partnership with Great Britain, promoted the League of Nations, supported a network of Alliances in Eastern Europe, but with many hesitations and it was affected by internal divides and a defensive strategy (Preda 2024, 169-206). In Adrian-Eugen Preda's opinion, Paris was not very interested in Romania's domestic affairs and it kept its distance from Bucharest (Ibidem). Nazi Germany interfered in both, even if it was less moved by ideology, in this case, and worked with the local leaders, who changed the political regime three times, in 1938, 1940 and 1941, pursued anti-Semitic policies and took part in the Holocaust (Preda 2024, 207-240).

The author argues that hegemony is a spectrum that leads to an unavoidable ambiguity (Preda 2024, 112). Force is a necessity in world politics, thus the great powers can impose their will, while the smaller actors may adapt, manipulate and sometimes, deny or oppose the stronger actors⁴. It is not clear when and how this happens, since even tight dominium can be outmaneuvered from inside, as it was the case of August 23, 1944, or Nicolae Ceausescu's policy show. The IR research is still unclear at this point, mostly arguing that the smaller powers are not very important and Adrian-Eugen Preda acknowledges that his findings cannot be generalized (Ibidem, 115-118).

Another ambiguity refers to the relationship between external rule and internal institutions. It is unclear whether loose hegemony always leads to inclusive domestic institutions, or if tight dominium means dictatorship and economic abuse within the small power. Totalitarian powers such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union supported or imposed local strongmen and repressive regime, while Imperial Germany during the World War I occupation accepted some degree of liberalization.

⁴ An objection to the whole trend which emphasizes the autonomy of small powers is that the major actor set the terms of the interaction and that is contradictory to rely on power as the main variable (Radu Ungureanu, personal communication).



The loose variant was sometimes related to more inclusive regimes (Romania after 1995), and sometimes, to extractive institutions (most of the interwar period).

The last ambiguity concerns the role of local elites. Adrian-Eugen Preda argues that they decide both in terms of foreign affairs and domestic institutions, unless the hegemon intervenes directly (Preda 2024, 71-80). Nevertheless, in moments such as 1914, 1916, or 1940, they either followed the public opinion, or they were pushed away. Without a more general societal perspective, there are questions regarding the source and the limits of elite's agency, even in smaller powers⁵.

Thus, hegemony is a flexible relationship: small powers have more agency than their name suggests, but this ability has clear limits. This is the main idea I have gathered from this work, and it holds true even today, when the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the rise of China and the changes in US domestic and foreign attitudes pushed the theme back on the international relations. The book main drawback is an overly ambitious attempt to integrate external and domestic structures and events. This does not affect much the quality of its main arguments and the usefulness of a broad perspective for the reader interested in Romania's past and present, or in understanding regional diplomacy and security.

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⁵ This is similar to the arguments made against neoclassical realism, which state that this perspective relies to ad hoc factors taken from domestic politics (A. Miroiu, *Despărţirea de realism sau despre sărăcia realismului neoclasic* 2007).

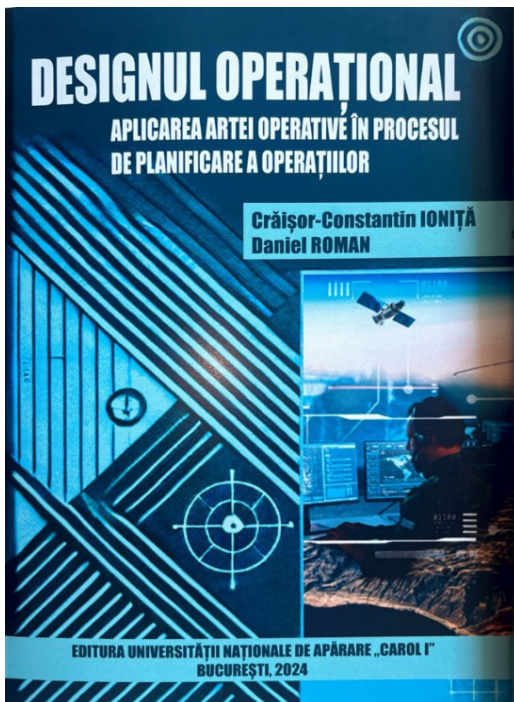
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OPERATIONAL DESIGN

Applying Operational Art into the Planning Process of Operations

by Brig. Gen. (Ret.) SR Crăișor C. IONIȚĂ
and Col. Asoc. Prof. Daniel ROMAN

One of the most recent books published by the ‘Carol I’ National Defence University Publishing House, titled *Operational Design. Applying Operational Art into the Planning Process of Operations*, provides a more comprehensive and



dynamic perspective, on the significance of art in the military field. It explores how the key elements of operational design are developed and utilized to support the commander’s decision-making cycle while also serving as a tool to facilitate the operational planning process. As stated in the cited book, this design represents the applicability of operational art in the planning process for operations, by defining the problem setting to achieve a sufficient level of understanding, which will automatically lead to finding a solution for its resolution.

Both authors of the book, respectively Brigadier General (Ret.) Crăișor C. Ioniță, Scientific Researcher, and Colonel Daniel Roman, Associated Professor, are members of the academic staff of the ‘Carol I’ National Defence University,

with in-depth experience in strategic and operational-level planning and conduct of operations, leadership training, concept development and experimentation, and scenarios development, as well as full involvement in applying critical thinking in high military education and defence scientific research. As a result, in addition to its practical applicability in the military educational process (real knowledge of those



operational design elements which have an important impact in the decision-making cycle and operations planning process), the book also includes detailed scientific analysis on the support provided by the design to the statesmen and military leaders' vision regarding potential future conflicts. Thus, it becomes a valuable tool for assessing the consequences of planning and conducting warfare at the strategic and operational levels.

As the authors mention, the book consists of seven chapters and is aimed both at professionals within the national defence system who are directly involved in the decision-making and operations planning processes, as well as at students in various forms of higher military education. It serves as a useful, necessary and indispensable tool in the decision-making and planning task forces at the operational/ joint level.

To achieve their objectives, the authors start from the idea that operational design teaches us how to think and relies on the clear definition of the problem to be solved within the political and strategic context of the modern operating environment. It is also connected to the civilian sector, where the design and quality of operations conducted by a private company are the only ways to compete in the capital market. Thus, a business model that highlights the strengths and weaknesses or the performance and quality of the companies' activities.

Essentially, operational design is a process led by a commander and developed by their subordinate staff to analyse ideas, synthesize concepts, facilitate learning, and promote a common understanding of the strategic context and the problem that drives the organisation toward finding an effective solution. The task force that deals with the operational design represents an extension of the commander's intellect. Therefore, the purpose of such team is not to think on behalf of the commander, but to critically and creatively help them conceptualize the problem at hand.

Representing a cognitive foresight activity, operational design is developed in its entirety, meaning from the desired end state to the existing situation, focusing on how to reach this end state in the most effective and efficient way possible. The transition from the future to the present is made by highlighting/outlining key elements of this design, an element that supports the logical and foresight approach to the operations planning process and, implicitly, decision-making by military leaders. Even if it is also completed at the strategic level, the quintessence of operational design is represented by the operative art, which establishes the 'way forward' for achieving the proposed objectives and reaching the desired end state.

The book uses 35 well-designed images and two descriptive annexes in support of or as arguments for the authors' statements and ideas. These figures highlight some systemic analysis for the modern operating environment – PMESII, ASCOPE, METT-T, VUCA, etc. –, and how conceptual models can be established to analyse of unstructured problems and transform them into structured problems, for which solutions can be identified, like several models of 'learning processes' – SOD,



LUMAS or ‘Design Thinking’. The figures and annexes also present how this methodological learning support can be improved by artificial intelligence products, especially algorithms and analytical software platforms.

The 128-page volume contains a lot of data and information, making it not an easy read; however, at the same time, it constantly challenges the reader to filter the details presented through their mind and to synthesize the most interesting and relevant ones. However, once the reader becomes absorbed in the reading, the book can no longer be set aside, with both the inserted images and detailed appendices contributing to a better understanding, as well as the bibliography that the authors have used. Therefore, we recommend this book to all those studying the planning and conduct of military operations, and to anyone interested in the decision-making system within Romanian Armed Forces, to better understand how it incorporates both elements of military science and operational art. This is because operational design represents the most important element of this art applied in the operations planning process, serving as a facilitator, and because design encompasses the visionary elements of the military leader – the intention and the manoeuvre scheme (the so-called ‘sketch’ in the civilian environment) -, as well as possible ways to solve the problem that has arisen.

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WORKSHOP

“THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON NATIONAL SECURITY (III)”

December 11, 2024

The Centre for Defence and Security Strategic Studies (CDSSS), structure within the National Defence University “Carol I”, organized on December 11, 2024, the Workshop titled “The Impact of Climate Change on National Security (III)”, in coordination with the General Directorate for Armaments. The workshop represented the final stage of the project with the same name, part of the Sectoral Research and Development Plan of the Ministry of National Defence for the 2022-2024 period. The project was undertaken by Romania at the request of the European Commission as part of the joint efforts of European states to combat the effects of these changes and identify viable solutions to mitigate them.

The project timeline was divided into three stages, each culminating in a workshop aimed at achieving both general and specific objectives, as follows:

- Stage I: March – December 2022;
- Stage II: January – December 2023;
- Stage III: January – December 2024.

The overall objectives encompass the entire research endeavor and aim to: identify the main national threats posed by climate change; analyze the major consequences of climate change impacts on national and regional stability and security; identify solutions to the challenges posed by climate change - focusing on green economy opportunities and climate action; discuss adaptation measures to address the inevitable effects of climate change; identifying solutions to improve adaptation capacity and enhance the resilience of socio-economic and natural systems to the effects of climate change; determining the responsible institutions, and the role and position of national power instruments in managing the effects of climate change; presenting national policies and measures aimed at reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; identifying economic sectors where specific measures to reduce GHG emissions are needed; identifying key elements of a low-carbon economy.



The specific objectives of each workshop/stage followed, in succession, the standard ADDIE stages (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) which are necessary developing the analytical model assessing the effects of climate change on national security as a final deliverable.

The entire project team's effort was focused on security sectors, aiming to analyze and determine integrated approaches to mitigate/eliminate the effects of climate change, as follows:

Politics – international policy, highlighting aspects that impact national security; analysis of international and national programmatic documents, strategies, initiatives, etc.; actions, measures, and initiatives within the European Union;

Defence – specific actions, steps, initiatives and measures at the NATO and national levels;

Societal – raising awareness within society about the effects of climate change, perceived insecurity at the individual and societal levels as a result of climate change impacts;

Economic – effects on the economy at national and regional levels;

Ecological – utilizing information disseminated during workshops by experts in the field. In addition to the sectors mentioned above, the project also includes a public communication component on climate change and impacts on national security.

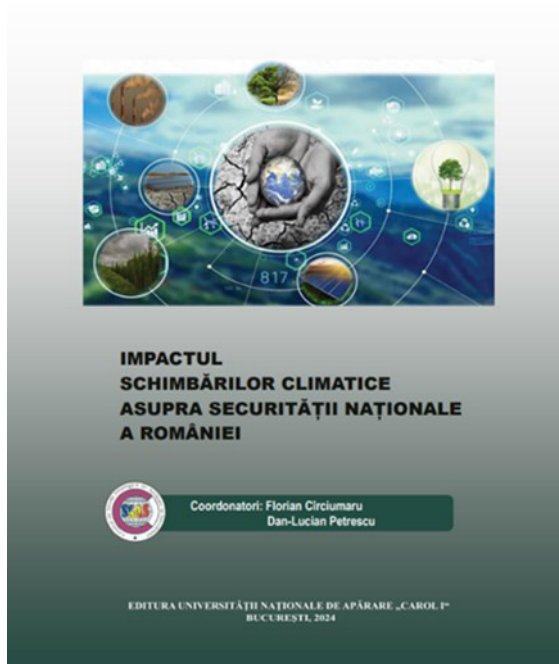
The scientific event held on December 11, 2024, marked the conclusion of the project by presenting the research process undertaken and the results obtained: the identification of Romania's vulnerabilities, developing an analytical model for assessing threats and risks to national security posed by climate change, and forecasting how these changes could impact Romania's national security over the next 20 years.

At the end of the project, the scientific researchers from CDSSS developed an analytical model to assess the effects of climate change on national security, as follows:

- Alexandra SARCINSCHI, PhD, Senior Researcher, “Building a Model for Analysing the Impact of Climate Change on National Security”;
- Mirela ATANASIU, PhD, Senior Researcher, “The Ecological Dimension of Climate Change”;
- Mihai ZODIAN, PhD, Researcher, “Global Warming, International Relations and Romania”;
- Mirela ATANASIU, PhD, Senior Researcher, “The European and National Political Dimension of Climate Change”;
- Crăişor-Constantin IONIȚĂ, PhD, Researcher, “Effects of Climate Change for the National Defence”;
- Cristian BĂHNĂREANU, PhD, Senior Researcher, “The Economic Implications of Climate Change”;



- Alexandra SARCINSCHI, PhD, Senior Researcher, “Climate Change-Related Societal Risks and Risk Perception;
- Daniela LICĂ, PhD, Researcher, “Public Communication on Climate change and its Impact upon Romania’s National Security”.



Book cover: “The Impact of Climate Change on Romania’s National Security”, NDU “Carol I” Publishing House, ISBN: 978-606-660-495-6, available at: https://cssas.unap.ro/ro/pdf_carti/Carte_ISCSNR.pdf

The book *The Impact of Climate Change on Romania’s National Security* provides a detailed analysis of the most important aspects related to climate change developments and the impact of its effects on the security environment, with a focus on the national level. Structured into eight chapters, each chapter provides rigorous and detailed analyses, based on solid scientific foundations and formulates well-argued conclusions, contributing to a better understanding and management of the risks associated with this phenomenon.

The research is based on a common analytical model, described in the first chapter, which sets out the essential aspects of the scientific approach, both structurally and formally. The remaining seven chapters are designed as autonomous sections, each approaching climate change from a different perspective and highlighting its impact on national security across various areas. This structure has allowed the authors to express their own perspectives on the analyzed phenomena, while maintaining a common logical framework that facilitates the integration of conclusions into a comprehensive vision.

In this way, the results can be further used for risk analysis, forecasts, and scenario development, helping to identify effective and applicable solutions that support beneficiaries in drafting or adapting future strategies and policies in the field, as well as implementation plans within the analyzed domain.

The event brought together a significant number of participants – military and civilian personnel, representatives of the Ministry of National Defence, academics,



researchers, and experts from institutions belonging to the National Defence, Public Order and National Security System It provided an essential scientific framework for discussing the impact of climate change on national security, facilitating a valuable exchange of ideas and perspectives. We are confident that the outcomes of this meeting will contribute to a better understanding and management of future challenges.



Event photo: “*The Impact of Climate Change on National Security (III)*”

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Reference list entries (in alphabetical order)

Grazer, Brian, and Charles Fishman. 2015. *A Curious Mind: The Secret to a Bigger Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Smith, Zadie. 2016. *Swing Time*. New York: Penguin Press.

In-text citation

(Grazer and Fishman 2015, 12)

(Smith 2016, 315–16)

¹ URL: https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html



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Reference list entry

Thoreau, Henry David. 2016. "Walking." *In The Making of the American Essay*, edited by John D'Agata, 167–95. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.

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(Thoreau 2016, 177–78)

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Reference list entries (in alphabetical order)

Keng, Shao-Hsun, Chun-Hung Lin, and Peter F. Orazem. 2017. "Expanding College Access in Taiwan, 1978–2014: Effects on Graduate Quality and Income Inequality." *Journal of Human Capital* 11, no. 1 (Spring): 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690235>.

LaSalle, Peter. 2017. "Conundrum: A Story about Reading." *New England Review* 38 (1): 95–109. Project MUSE.

In-text citation

(Keng, Lin, and Orazem 2017, 9–10)

(LaSalle 2017, 95)

WEBSITE CONTENT

Reference list entries (in alphabetical order)

Bouman, Katie. 2016. "How to Take a Picture of a Black Hole." Filmed November 2016 at TEDxBeaconStreet, Brookline, MA. Video, 12:51. https://www.ted.com/talks/katie_bouman_what_does_a_black_hole_look_like

Google. 2017. "Privacy Policy." Privacy & Terms. Last modified April 17, 2017. <https://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>

Yale University. n.d. "About Yale: Yale Facts." Accessed May 1, 2017. <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/yale-facts>

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Reference list entries (in alphabetical order)

Manjoo, Farhad. 2017. "Snap Makes a Bet on the Cultural Supremacy of the Camera." *New York Times*, March 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/technology/snap-makes-a-bet-on-the-cultural-supremacy-of-the-camera.html>

Mead, Rebecca. 2017. "The Prophet of Dystopia." *New Yorker*, April 17, 2017.

Pai, Tanya. 2017. "The Squishy, Sugary History of Peeps." *Vox*, April 11, 2017. <http://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/11/15209084/peeps-easter>

In-text citation

(Manjoo 2017)

(Mead 2017, 43)

(Pai 2017)

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